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BRESSANT

A ROMANCE

BY

JULIAN HAWTHORNE



IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

HENRY S. KING & Co.

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OF
THE SECOND VOLUME.

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BRESSANT.



CHAPTER I.

AN INTERMISSION.

BRESSANT'S recovery was now very rapid, as he had himself foretold. The wedding was finally fixed for New Year's day at noon. They were to be married at the Parsonage; afterwards they might go south for two or three months, but it was understood that they would return to the village before settling permanently anywhere.

'If there isn't room for us here, we can board at Abbie's; it would be very pleasant, wouldn't it?' said Sophie, but Bressant made no rejoinder.

Professor Valeyon was getting on well beneath the weight of his prospective loss. He indulged in as many comforting reflections as

he could. Cornelia would still be with him, and he loved her as much in one way as Sophie in another. He seemed to think, too, that the bride and groom would probably settle somewhere in the neighbourhood. Again, he felt a greater natural affection for Bressant than for any other young man: what son-in-law, after all, would he have preferred to have? And there may have been additional considerations equally pleasant in the contemplation.

Sophie was in her element ; the loveliness and richness of her character came out like a sweet, sustaining perfume. In love, all her faculties found their fullest exercise. There was no doubt nor darkness in her soul. Without looking upon her lover as an angel, she saw in him the grand possibilities which human nature still possesses, and felt that she might aid them somewhat to develope and flourish.

As for Bressant, originally the least inclined of any of the circle to be pensive and sombre, he now seemed occasionally to contend with shadows of some kind. He was far from being habitually gloomy, but his moods were not to be depended upon ; sometimes a turn of the conversation would seem to alter him ; sometimes a

word which he himself might utter ; sometimes a silence, which found him light-hearted, would leave him troubled and restless. Sophie, so strong and trustful was her happiness, never suspected that anything more than the fretting of his sickness was responsible for this, and, indeed, thought little about it at all ; for after all, what was it compared to the full tide which swept them both along in such an over-mastering harmony ?

Within a week from the day of the engagement, a letter came from Cornelia, speaking of her desire to be at home again, and further intimating that she meant to return in a month at furthest. She did not write with as much liveliness and light-heartedness as usual. Sophie read the letter aloud to Bressant and her father as they sat in the former's room on a cool August afternoon.

‘How surprised she will be to hear what has been going on !’ said Sophie, looking for Bressant to sympathise with her smile. ‘I’ll write to her this evening and tell her all about it.’ She paused to imagine Cornelia’s delight, astonishment, and playful dismay on learning that her younger sister, whom nobody ever sus-

pected of such a thing, was going to be married, and to 'that deaf creature' too, whom they had discussed so freely only two months or so before. 'She must know before anybody,' said Sophie, and the Professor, as he rubbed his spectacles, grunted in approval.

But Bressant chewed his moustache, and said hastily, the blood reddening his face, 'No, no! wait; wait till she comes back. She can know it first, still; but you had better tell her with words. You can see, with your own eyes, then, how—how it pleases her.'

'Yes, that is true,' said Sophie, half reluctantly. 'Well?'

Bressant lay silent, with a peering, concentrated look in his eyes, his brows slightly contracted. He must have had an intuitive foreboding that this matter of the two sisters would cause some difficulty, but he could hardly as yet have had a distinct understanding of what jealousy meant.

Howbeit, the lovers grew every day more intimate. In the earlier days of her intercourse with him Sophie had felt an involuntary shrinking from she knew not what, but this had been entirely overcome, partly by habit, partly from

an unconscious resolve on her part not to yield to it. The quick, intelligent sympathy of her nature discerned and interpreted the germs of new ideas and impulses which were struggling into life in Bressant's mind; she translated to him his better part, and warmed it with a flood of celestial sunshine.

But the sun which makes flowers bloom, brings forth weeds as well, and it would not be strange if this awakening of Bressant's dormant faculties should have also brought some evil to the surface which else might never have seen the light.

In the course of another week or so the invalid had so far improved as to be able to leave his room, and make short excursions about the house, and on to the balcony. The feverish and morbid symptoms faded away, and the indulgence of a Titanic appetite began to bring back the broad, firm muscles to arms, legs, and body. He felt the returning exhilaration of boundless vitality and restless vigour which had distinguished him before his accident.

The summer was now something overworn; the sultry dregs of August were ever and anon stirred by the cool finger of September. The

leaves, losing the green strength of their blood, changed colour and fluttered wavering earthwards from the boughs whereon they had spent so many sociable months. The surrounding hills seen from the parsonage balcony took on subtle changes of tint; the patches of pine and evergreen showed out more and more distinctly; the over-ripe grass in the valley lay in lines of fragrant haycocks.

Every day, in the garden, a greater number of red and yellow leaves drifted about the paths, or scattered themselves over the flower-beds, or floated on the surface of the fountain basin. Little brown birds hopped backwards and forwards among the twigs, with quick, jerking tails and sideway speculative heads; or upon the ground, pecking at it here and there with their little bills, as if under the impression that it was Summer's grave, and they might chance to dig her up again. But once in a while they got discouraged, and took a sudden rustling flight to the roof-tree of the barn, seemingly half inclined to continue on indefinitely southwards. Then, a reluctance to leave the old place coming over them, they would dip back again on their elastic little wings, to hop and peck anew.

Bressant and Sophie were sitting one afternoon—it was in the first days of September, and within less than a week of the time when they might begin to expect Cornelia—upon the little rustic bench beside the fountain. Their conversation had filtered softly into silence, and only the flop-flop of the weak-backed little spout continued to prattle to the stillness.

‘I don’t like it!’ exclaimed Bressant, stirring his foot impatiently. ‘I’d rather put my whole life into one strong, resistless shooting upwards, even if it lasted only a minute.’

‘The poor little fountain is happy enough,’ said well-balanced Sophie.

‘To do anything there must sometimes be a heat and fury in the blood; or a whirl and passion in the brain. Volcanoes reveal the earth’s heart!’ returned he, sententiously.

‘They’re very objectionable things though,’ suggested Sophie, arching her eyebrows.

‘They make beautiful mountains, whole islands, sometimes; in a man, they show what stuff is in him. It would be better to commit a deadly crime than to dribble out a life like that fountain’s!’

‘Even to speak of sin’s bringing forth good,

is a fearful and wicked thing,' said Sophie; and although tears rose to her eyes, her voice was almost stern. 'But you don't know what you say: only think, and you will shudder at it.'

But Bressant was perverse. 'I think anything is better than to be torpid. I'd rather know I could never hope for happiness hereafter, than not have blood enough really to hope or despair at all.'

'Why do you speak so?' asked Sophie, with a look of pain in her grave little face. 'Do you fear any such torpor in your own life? My love, this hasn't always been so.'

'I feel too much in me to manage, sometimes,' said he, leaning forward on his knees, and working in the sanded path with his foot. 'I'm not accustomed to myself yet: it will come all right, later. My health and strength, too, so soon after my weakness—they intoxicate me, I think.'

Sophie looked at his broad back and dark curly head, and brown, short beard, as he sat thus beside her, and she grew pale, and sighed. 'It isn't right, dear,' said she, shaking her head.

There is a quiet and deep strength—not demonstrative—that is better than any passion:

it is less striking, I suppose, but it recognises more a Power greater than any we have.'

'It's true—what you say always is true!' responded Bressant, throwing himself back in the seat. 'Sophie,' he added, without turning his eyes upon her, 'if I shouldn't turn out all you wish, you won't stop loving me?'

'I couldn't, I think, if I tried,' replied she; and there was more of regret than of satisfaction in her tone as she said it. 'Or, if I could, it would tear me all to pieces; and there would be nothing left but my love to God, which is His already. All of me, except that, is love for you.'

'God and heaven seem unreal—unsubstantial, at any rate—compared with you,' said Bressant, striking his hand heavily upon the arm of the rustic bench. 'My love for you is greater than for them!'

'Oh stop! hush!' cried Sophie, flinching back as if she had received a mortal thrust. The light of indignation and repulse in her grey eyes was awful to Bressant, and his own dropped beneath it. 'Have you no respect for your soul?' she continued, presently. 'How long would such love last? in what would it

end? it would not be love—it would be the deadliest kind of hate.'

Bressant rose to his feet, and made a gesture with his arms in the air, as if striving by a physical act to regain the mental force and equilibrium which Sophie had so unexpectedly overthrown. The mighty strength and untamed vehemence of the man's nature were exhibited in the movement. Sophie saw, in the vision of a moment, on how wild and stormy a sea she had embarked, and for a moment, perhaps, she quailed at the sight. But again her great love brought back the flush of dauntless courage, and her trembling ceased. She became aware, at that critical moment, that she was the stronger of the two; and Bressant probably felt it also. He had put forth all his power in a passionate and convulsive effort to prevail over the soul of this delicate girl, and he had been worsted in the brief, silent struggle. He did not need to look in her clear eyes to know it.

His love must have been strong, indeed; for it stood the test of the defeat. He sat down again, and after an almost imperceptible hesitation, he held out his hand towards her. She put her own in it, with its pressure, soft and delicately strong.

‘I can’t reason about these things—I can only feel,’ said he. ‘You can look into my heart if you will. Don’t give me up : you can help me to see it all as you do. Isn’t it your duty, Sophie, if you love me ?’

‘Oh ! I will pray for you, my darling,’ she answered, almost sobbing in the tenderness of her great heart, and laying her head upon his broad shoulder. ‘I would not lose your love for all the world ; but I feared you might be led to something—something that would prevent your loving either God or me. Promise me something, dear : if you are ever in trouble or danger, and I’m not with you, come to me ! No harm can reach us when we’re together. You need me, and I you.’

‘I promise,’ replied Bressant.

In the short silence that followed, Sophie heard, though Bressant could not, a quick, excited, warbling voice calling her again and again by name. She released herself from her lover’s hold, and sprang up with a cry of delight.

Bressant, surprised and defrauded, was about to remonstrate ; but ere the words came, he saw Cornelia appear upon the balcony, and he sank back and held his peace.

CHAPTER II.

BRESSANT CONFIDES A SECRET TO THE FOUNTAIN.

SOPHIE went flitting up the garden path towards the house, and in a moment more the sisters were in one another's arms. Bressant, glad of the concealment afforded by the shrubbery, remained gazing moodily at the fountain, his head on his hand. The two girls entered the house, and sat down in the Professor's study, where the old gentleman (who had been the first to meet Cornelia) sat enclouding himself with smoke, but betraying no other symptom of his huge delight.

'But how came you to get here so soon, you dear darling?' said Sophie, looking with lighted eyes at her sister. 'We thought it would be a week at least.'

'Oh, bless your heart, I couldn't wait, you know. So awfully tired I got of seeing new

things and people. Dear me!’—and Cornelia threw herself back in her chair and uplifted her gloved hands in a little gesture of ineffability—‘you would never imagine what a bore society is, after all.’

The Professor, from his cloud, cast, unobserved, a glance of quiet scrutiny at his daughter. A certain jaunty embroidery of tone and manner struck him at once—she wasn’t quite the same simple little woman who had gone to New York two months ago. Well, well, they would wear off, perhaps, these little affectations; and then, too, it was not to be expected of her that she’d be a girl all her life. They all must needs pass through this stage to something better—or worse: all women of pith and passion like Cornelia.

‘How did you leave Aunt Margaret?’ enquired he.

‘Oh, *désolée*, because I would go away,’ replied Cornelia, with a very pretty laugh. ‘She vowed she could have spared me much better six weeks earlier; for you see, after I’d learnt the ropes, and how to take care of myself, I became, as she expressed it, “Such a dear, sweet, *invaluable* little *attachée*.”’

Sophie laughed at the comical air with which her sister repeated the sentence ; yet, when her laugh was gone, there remained a slight shadow of disappointment. She, too, was unwillingly aware of some alteration.

‘Is she such a grand lady as you expected?’ asked she.

‘Oh, my dear, grandeur’s a humbug, let me tell you. Gracious! by the time I’d been there a week, I could put it on as well as anybody. Aunt Margaret, she was no end of a swell, and all that; but as for grandeur!—And she was such an odd old thing. Sometimes I seemed to like her, and sometimes she almost made me faint. Once in a while I thought she was trying to pump me about something; though, to be sure, there was nothing in me to be pumped. I told her about Abbie, for one thing, as much as I knew, and she seemed awfully interested—it was put on, I suppose, very likely; and yet she really did seem to mean it. I remember she couldn’t get over my forgetting Abbie’s last name: she even told me to mention it the first time I wrote to her. So queer of the old person.’

‘No necessity for you to write, my dear,’

observed the Professor at this point. 'I've been intending to do it myself for some time, and I'll thank her for her hospitality, and so forth.'

Cornelia nodded, yawned, and then allowed her eyes to wander around the room.

'How nice and cosy and homelike everything does look! And so small. Why, I should almost believe I was looking through the small end of the telescope, or something.'

'New York houses are so big, I suppose?' said Sophie.

'Gracious, dear!' exclaimed Cornelia, laughing again. 'Why, the very cupboards are bigger than this whole house. It'll take me ever so long to get over being afraid to knock my head against something when I stand up.'

'You can sit outdoors until the weather gets too cold,' observed the Professor. 'The sky is as high here as in New York, isn't it?'

Cornelia ignored this remark with admirable self-poise. 'Aunt Margaret was asking a good deal about Mr. Bressant, too,' said she. 'She said she'd only heard about him from you, papa; but I thought, sometimes, she must be fibbing. Once in a while, you know, she acted just as if she had forgotten having said she

didn't know him. However, that's absurd, of course. By the way, where is he? Here still?'

'Oh, yes. Oh! Neelie dear, I have such news to tell you. But—yes, he's out there by the fountain, I believe. Go out and speak to him, and then come up to my room and hear the secret.'

'All right, I'll be there directly;' and springing from her chair with a sudden overflow of animal spirits, drowning out the small growth of affectation, the beautiful woman danced out upon the balcony, and down the steps. Sophie went to her chamber, and the Professor remained in his study to indulge his own thoughts, which, by the way, appeared to be neither light nor agreeable.

As Cornelia neared the fountain, her steps grew more staid. The clustering shrubbery hid Bressant from sight until she was close upon him. She thought, perhaps, in the few moments that passed as she walked down the path, of that other time when she had picked her way, in his company, between the rain-besprinkled shrubs. Here was the same tea-rose bush, and hardly a flower left upon it. Yes, here was

one, full blown, to be sure, and ready to fall to pieces; but still perhaps he would smile and remember when he saw it in her bosom; or perhaps—and Cornelia smiled secretly to herself at the thought—perhaps he needed no reminder. He was sitting by the fountain now. What more likely than that he was thinking over that first strange scene that had been enacted between them there? Dear fellow! how he would start and redden with pleasure when he saw her appear, in flesh and blood, in the midst of his reverie! Cornelia blushed; but some of the loose petals of the overblown rose in her bosom became detached, and floated earthwards.

All at once her heart began to beat so as to incommode her: she was uncertain whether she was pale or red. It seemed to require all her courage to get over the last few steps of garden path that brought her into view. What was it? A premonition? Now she saw him, as he sat with his legs crossed, his head resting on his hand, turned away from her, staring moodily before him. He did not look up until Cornelia stood almost beside him; then, become aware of her presence, he leaped suddenly

to his feet, and towered before her, one hand grasping the fantastically curved limb which ornamented the back of the rustic seat.

In the space that intervened while Cornelia, startled at his abrupt movement, remained motionless in front of him, the piece of branch which his hand held parted with a sharp crack. It broke the pause, and Cornelia laughed.

‘You seem to be recovering your strength pretty well, if you can break the limb of a tree short off just by laying your hand upon it! How do you do? aren’t you glad to see me?’ and she held out her hand with a frankness not all real, for she felt a secret misgiving, and an undefined fear.

But the strain of Bressant’s suspense was removed. He concluded that either Cornelia had as yet heard nothing of his bond with Sophie, or that, having heard it, it had not seriously affected her. Of the two suppositions he was inclined to the first (and correct) one; but he kept scanning her face with an uneasy curiosity. He took her hand, shook it, and dropped it.

‘How do you do?’ said he.

They took their places side by side upon the

bench. Cornelia felt a great weight pressing heavily and more heavily upon her, crushing out life and vivacity. This was not what she had expected; what did it mean? was it indifference? was it aversion? could it—could it be an uncouth way of showing joy? Poor Cornelia held her clasped hands in her lap and knew not what to say.

When the silence had lasted so long that in another moment she must have screamed, she chanced to remember the watch. It was ticking steadily in her belt. She dragged it out, her hands feeling stiff and numb, and then commanding herself by a not inconsiderable effort to speak naturally, she put it in his hand, which he opened mechanically to receive it.

‘Here it is, all safe. You can’t think how punctual I’ve learned to be since I’ve had it. I got to be quite superstitious about winding it up; but it did run down once—just about six weeks after I left. It was in the forenoon, about eleven. I—I happened to be looking at it at the time, and suddenly the second hand began to go slower and slower, and at last it stopped. You can’t think how frightened I was. I

couldn't help thinking that something must have happened at home. I wrote to Sophie that I would come home the same afternoon. Of course you know'—here Cornelia interrupted the hurried and nervous flow of her words to force a laugh—'of course it wasn't anything but that I'd been up late talking with Aunt Margaret, and had forgotten to wind it. It isn't out of order or anything.'

She was out of breath now, and had to pause. She would gladly have kept on indefinitely, for the sake of avoiding another of those dreadful silences.

Bressant was not in the habit of paying much attention to coincidences, but it happened to occur to him that the stoppage of the watch must have taken place pretty nearly, if not exactly, at the time of his engagement to Sophie, and the thought rendered his discomposure still more painful.

'Won't you keep the watch?' said he at length.

'Keep it?' repeated Cornelia, timidly, uncertain what might be coming next. Her breath went and came unevenly. 'How can I keep it?' faltered she. 'They know—papa

and Sophie know—that I haven't any such watch. I—I have no right to keep it.'

She could hardly have spoken more plainly ; indeed, she had been surprised into speaking much more plainly than she intended. The moment after her pride rebuked her, and made her cheeks burn with shame ; and a feeling of anger at having so betrayed herself put a sparkle into her eyes. Bressant, looking at her, was stricken by the angry glow of her beauty. It began to dazzle his reason, and bind his will. Their eyes met fully for a moment : a world of fatal significance can sometimes be conveyed by a glance. The extremity of his danger perhaps aroused the young man to a realization of it. He stood up, and pressed one hand over his eyes.

'If you've no right to keep the watch, I've no right to give it you, I suppose,' said he, sullenly.

'I owe you an apology, certainly, Mr. Bressant,' exclaimed Cornelia, interrupting what more he might have been going to say. She was tingling to her finger tips with the intolerable anger of a woman who finds herself rejected and befooled. 'Really, I am surprised

at myself for persecuting you so relentlessly. Not satisfied with depriving you of your time-piece for two whole months, I actually am unable to surrender my—my ill-gotten booty without giving you an uncomfortable feeling that I want to task your beneficence further yet. Well, I've not a word to say for myself. I had no grudge to pay. I'm sure your conduct to me has always been—most unexceptionably polite! The most charitable explanation is, that I was crazy. I hope you'll consent to accept it; and I do assure you that I'm perfectly sane now, and mean to keep 'so. You needn't,' she continued laughing, 'you really needn't be afraid of my persecutions any longer. I'm going to be as circumspect as—as you are. Now, good-bye for the present.' She held out her hand with an air of formal courtesy. 'I promised Sophie I'd be back directly. I'll see you at dinner, I suppose?'

As she came to the good-bye, Cornelia had risen from her seat; by the action the remaining petals of the tea-rose had been shaken off, leaving the nucleus bare and unprotected. Bressant's eyes fastened idly upon it, but he said nothing, and did not move. Cornelia with-

drew her unaccepted hand, smiled, and, turning about, walked up the path to the house with an easy and dignified grace, which was not so much natural as the inspired result of passion.

Bressant looked down at the watch in his hand, and saw it marking the hour at which a dark epoch in his life began. He knelt on one knee by the basin of the fountain—but not to pray. Grasping in one hand the guard-chain of his watch, he dashed the watch itself two or three times against the stone basin-rim. When it was completely shattered, he tossed it into the water, and then rose lightly to his feet.

CHAPTER III.

PUTTING ON THE ARMOUR.

SOPHIE, in her room, was moving about hither and thither, ostensibly to put things in order, but really to make the time before her sister's appearance pass the easier. She was little given to the manifestation of impatience ; but now, so much did she long to pour out her heart to her sister on the subject of her love ; to speak with a freedom which she could use to no one else—not even to Bressant himself—and to receive the full and satisfying measure of sympathy which she felt that only Cornelia could give her—dear, loving, joyous Cornelia !—so much did all these things press upon her, that she found waiting a very tedious affair.

At last she heard Cornelia's step along the hall, and up the staircase. It sounded more slow and listless than a few minutes before, as

if she were treading under the weight of a weary load. Now that she was out of Bressant's eyeshot, the support afforded by her anger had given way, and she felt very tired, very reckless, and rather grim. She entered Sophie's open door, crossed the room heavily, and, with scarcely a glance at her sister, threw herself plump into the chair by the window.

'Poor child,' thought Sophie; 'she's so tired with that long journey; but she'll be refreshed by what I have to tell her.'

'I'm so glad you're here,' she continued, aloud. 'I've never wanted any one so much, especially since the last two weeks. A great happiness has come to me, dear; but I haven't been able fully to enjoy it, because I couldn't tell you: they didn't want me to write. But I wouldn't tell anyone before you, nor let anyone tell you but me, because I wanted to enjoy your enjoyment all myself.'

Sophie had sat down at Cornelia's feet, upon a little wooden cricket which stood in the window, and had taken one of her hands in both of hers. Cornelia glanced down at her somewhat indifferently: she had scarcely attended to what her sister had been saying.

But the fathomless expression of happiness upon Sophie's uplifted face struck through her gloom and pain. She had never seen anything like it before ; and probably at no moment of her life had Sophie's earthly content been so complete.

'I am engaged to be married,' said she, a rose-coloured flush spreading over her cheeks. She delayed lovingly over the words: they were dear, because they expressed such a world of happiness.

Cornelia repeated the words stupidly. She felt as if she were rooted beneath a rock, which was about to fall and crush her. Yet, resolutely shutting her eyes to what she knew must come—to gain an instant's time to breathe and brace herself—she asked, with an air of vivacious interest, bending down and studying Sophie's face the while,—

'Engaged, did you say? To whom, dear?'

'Why, to Mr. Bressant. Who else could it be?'

Sophie spoke in a soft tone of gentle surprise, but the words rang in Cornelia's brain as if they had been fired from a cannon. She closed her eyes and leant back in her chair. The

strings of her hat choked her : she tore them apart, and the hat fell from her nerveless hand to the floor. She strove to open her eyes and command herself ; but her sight was blurred and darkened, and her head dizzy.

In a minute or two, however, she recovered herself sufficiently to be aware that Sophie was alarmed about her. The imperative necessity not to betray herself gave her a brief and superficial control. Her mind was in confusion ; and it was perhaps for this reason—because she could not collect her faculties and analyse the situation—that she was enabled to feel a gush of the natural, tender love for her sister—a joy in her joy. Knowing that such a mood could not last long, she hastened to make it available : she bent down and put her arms around Sophie's neck.

‘I'm so glad, darling ! so happy ! How splendid ! isn't it ? What a perfect match ! Ah, Sophie, I sympathise with you with all my heart. I couldn't have wished you anything better.’

This was doing very well. Her manner was a little exaggerated : her speech was hurried, and almost mechanical. She avoided looking Sophie

in the face while the lies were coming out of her mouth (if they were real lies, and not a bastard kind of truth, good while spoken, and the next moment degenerating into falsehood). Notwithstanding these minor defects, it was a very successful effort: excitement and even vehement emotion were quite admissible in a warm-hearted girl who had her sister's welfare nearly at heart; and much might be allowed to surprise. Indeed, Sophie, though a good deal agitated, and even anxious, was not in the least suspicious or dissatisfied. Such was the loyalty and humility of her own nature, that much stronger grounds would have failed to inspire misgivings.

'I thought you were going to be ill, at first,' she remarked, with a loving smile. 'Perhaps I told you too abruptly—did I? You see, I thought you half knew it already—at least that you suspected it; and then, to tell the truth, dear,' added she, with a bright smile in her eyes, 'I didn't think you'd care so much—be so *very* glad, I mean. There never was so sweet a sister as you.'

Cornelia felt that this must not go on any longer. She could feel her cheeks getting hot,

and her eyes bright: very little more, and there would be an outburst. She must leave the room at all hazards, and be by herself. She got up and stood unsteadily, with her cold hand to her hot forehead.

‘I believe I *don't* feel very well, Sophie: I think I must have a little palpitation, or something. I've been awfully dissipated, and all that, you know, with Aunt Margaret. I feel a little run down. Oh! it's nothing serious. Don't tell papa! no—don't on any account. I'll just go to my room and lie down for half an hour. I shall be all right before tea-time. You must tell me all the particulars afterwards—not just this moment. Don't mention anything about me, you know; and don't let anyone come up. Good-bye till supper, dear. *Au revoir.*'

She got out of the room, not very gracefully, probably, but still she escaped. A few hurried and uneven steps down the entry brought her to her own door. She burst it open, entered, and locked it behind her in feverish haste. Then, with a miserable sense of luxury, she flung herself on the bed, and was alone.

Her first sensation, as soon as the tumult in her thoughts suffered her to have any intelligent sensation at all, was one of secret pleasure and relief. It was a surprise to herself : she even struggled against it, and tried to convince herself that she was only miserable ; but still the sensation remained. Guilty or not, there it was, and she could not help it. The news of Bressant's engagement to Sophie was a relief and a pleasure to her.

The real pain—hard and bitter, and with no redeeming grain of consolation—had been the unexpected and unexplained change in his manner. She had met him, anticipating a tender and delicious renewal of the relations on which they had parted—the memory of which had never left her during her absence, and which had grown every day sweeter and more precious in the recollection. His silence and coldness, unaccompanied by any show of reasons, had penetrated her soul like iron. It could only be that she had become distasteful to him ; that what he had said and done before her departure had been in a spirit of deliberate trifling ; or, at the best, that it had been a mistake, of which he had been convinced

during their separation, and now wished to correct. The pride and resentment that were in her had risen up in defence, and, had the matter rested there, might ultimately have gained the victory.

But his engagement to Sophie—that was another story. In the first place, if he loved her sister, it did not therefore follow that he disliked her; quite the contrary. And on the other hand, it readily explained the restraint and embarrassment of his manner. How otherwise could he have acted? Well—and was this all?

Ah! no—not all! There was a tawny light in Cornelia's eyes as she lay upon the bed, flushed and dishevelled. She was thinking of a moment—that one little moment—when their glances had met, and penetrated to a fatal depth. For a time, the ensuing events had swept it from her memory; but now it returned, charged with a deeper and darker meaning than Cornelia at present cared to recognise. She was satisfied that it gave her comfort. She hid her thought away, as a miser does his gold: it was enough that it had existence, and could be used when the fitting hour should come. She had not seen the little

episode of the watch ; but that was, perhaps, scarcely necessary.

The intensity of the beautiful woman's reflections at length exhausted her mind's power of maintaining them : she turned over on her side, and began to follow with her eye the arabesques worked upon the white counterpane. It was just the sort of occupation which suited her mood. The arabesques were pretty and graceful : the counterpane was of immaculate whiteness : there was just enough of effort in tracing out the intricacies of the interlacements to give a gentle sensation of pleasure : and there was the latent consciousness, behind this voluntary trifling, that it could be exchanged at any moment for the most terribly real and absorbing excitement.

At length it occurred to her that time was passing, and the hour for tea must be near at hand. She sat up on the bed, threw off her light sacque, and unbuttoned her boots. Going to the glass, she saw that her hair was in disorder, and partly fallen down, and that one cheek was stamped with the creases of the pillow. She pulled off her gloves, and looked critically at her hands.

‘It’ll never do to go down this way!’ determined she. ‘I must make myself decent.’

In half an hour more she was finished, and took a parting peep at herself in the mirror. Cold water and a soft sponge had taken from her face all traces of travel and emotion. Her dark, crisp hair was arranged in marvellous convolutions, and from the white tip of each ear, peeping out beneath, hung an Etruscan gold ear-ring, given her by Aunt Margaret. Her cheeks were pale, but not colourless: her eyes glowed like a tiger’s. She was dressed in a black demi-toilette, relieved with glimpses of yellow here and there; an oblong piece cut out in front revealed, through softened edges of lace, the clear smooth flesh of the neck and bosom. The dream of a perfume hovered about her, and touched the air as she moved. Her wide sleeve fell open, as she raised her arm, disclosing the white curves, which were remarkably full and firm for one of her age.

She gave a little laugh as she stood there, that made the ear-rings quiver, and parted her lips enough to show that her small white teeth were set edge to edge.

‘It can’t do any harm,’ was passing through

her mind. 'If I'm to be his sister, he ought to like me. It's no use making him detest me. If he loves Sophie so much, what harm can it do for him to be pleased with my beauty? Besides, haven't I a right to my own good looks?'

She kissed her fingers to her reflection, and made a deep courtesy. As she did so, she caught sight of the little petal-less rose-stalk which had fallen out of her travelling dress on to the floor. She picked it up, and after turning it idly in her fingers for a moment, she yielded to a sudden fancy, and fastened it into the bosom of her dress: so that this symbol of a body from which the soul had departed formed the central and crowning ornament of the voluptuous and lovely woman.

'There!' ejaculated she, with a smile which did not part her lips, but seemed to draw her dark eyebrows a little closer together.

'Strange I'm so quiet!' she mused, as she walked slowly to the door. 'What an ordeal I have to go through! I must sit down with Sophie, and papa, and—him: listen to all the particulars, ask all the proper and necessary questions, smile and laugh; and it would be

well, I suppose, to rally the lovers archly on the ardour of their affection, and the suddenness of the consummation. Better still, I can laughingly allude to my own prior claim—suggest that I feel hurt at being distanced and left out in the cold by that demure little younger sister of mine! Oh! yes,' exclaimed Cornelia, clapping her hands together, 'that will cap the climax; what fun!'

Here the tea-bell rang. Cornelia put her hand on the door-handle.

'Of course, nobody could help loving Sophie—such a dear, simple, good little thing! and why not he as well as anyone else? and of course, in that case, Sophie must think that she loved him back—thought it her duty too, perhaps! Nobody was to blame.'

'But he was mine first!' she whispered to her heart, again and again, and she found a disastrous solace in each repetition. She flung open the door, and ran downstairs with a light step, a smiling face, and a fierce, tight heart.

CHAPTER IV.

LOCKED UP.

BRESSANT's health was now sufficiently established to warrant his moving back to Abbie's. Not that he was particularly anxious to go, but he had no pretext for staying, and his engagement to Sophie was a reason in etiquette why he should not. Accordingly about a week after Cornelia's arrival, such of his books and other property as had been sent to him from the boarding-house were packed in a box, which was hoisted in to the back of the waggon; he and Professor Valeyon mounted the seat, and with Dolly between the shafts they set out for the village.

'I suppose you remember a talk I had with you the first evening you came here?' said the old gentleman, as they turned the corner in the road. 'Told you it would be work enough for

a church-full of missionaries to make anything out of you, in the way of a minister, and so on ?'

'Very well; I remember the whole conversation,' said Bressant, pushing up his beard into his mouth and biting it.

'Thanks to God—I can't take any credit to myself—you've been more changed than I ever expected to see you. You've found your heart, and how to use it. That goes farther towards fitting you for the ministry than all the Divinity books ever printed.'

Bressant's hankering after the ministerial life was not so strong as it once had been; but he said nothing.

'You'll need means of support when you're married,' resumed the Professor. 'A few months' hard study will qualify you to take charge of a parish. The next parish to this will be vacant before next spring. If I apply for it now, I may be able to give it you, with your wife, as a New Year's gift.'

'I thought of getting a place in New York. What could I do in a country parish?'

'Expensive, living in New York!' said the Professor, with a glance of quiet scrutiny at his

companion's profile. 'Marriage won't be a good pecuniary investment for you, remember. Better begin safe. The village salary will be good enough.'

Bressant communed with himself in silence a few moments, before replying :

'As my father's will stands, Mrs. Vanderplanck—I believe he owed some obligation or other to her—receives half the fortune, and I the other half. Are you certain that my marriage, and the disclosure it would bring about, will forfeit the whole of it ?'

Professor Valeyon touched Dolly with the whip, and turned inward his white-bearded lips.

'All I can tell you about it,' said he, 'is this : when your mother married your father, all her property was settled upon her ; so that it was only the event of her death, intestate, that could have given your father the right to will it away at all.'

At this information, Bressant folded his arms, and, looking steadfastly before him, said not a word. A silence followed between the two, which lasted over half a mile. Dolly seemed to be in a meditative humour, likewise : she whisked her tail with an absorbed air, and once

in a while shook her ears, or wagged her head, as though accepting or rejecting some hypothesis or proposition. Most likely, her problems found their solution in the manger that afternoon ; but those of the Professor and his companion received neither so early nor so satisfactory a settlement.

When they had entered upon the willow-stretch; where the trees had already scattered upon the ground their first tribute of narrow golden leaves, the younger man came to the end of his meditations, straightened himself in his seat, and spoke :

‘Let it be as you said about the country parish ; if you can get it for me, I’ll be ready for it.’

Professor Valeyon’s face, which had been somewhat overcast, cleared beautifully : he appealed to Dolly’s sympathies with a flick of the whip, to which she responded with a knowing shake of the head, and a refreshing increase of speed.

‘That’s well, my dear boy,’ said he. ‘I respect you.’

‘I’m not the only one concerned,’ continued Bressant, who still sat in the same position,

with folded arms : 'it involves about as much for Mrs. Vanderplanck as for me. I shall have to consider that point, and attend to it first of all.'

'To tell you the truth,' returned Professor Valeyon, with an emphatic deliberation of manner, 'I don't think you can give her any information that she's not possessed of already. She knows as much as you do, that's certain. You'll do well to begin business nearer home than at Mrs. Vanderplanck's.'

Bressant lifted one hand to his beard, which he twisted about unmercifully. 'It's only since Cornelia came back that you have thought that,' he said at length, with sudden keenness.

The old gentleman nodded, and met steadily the rapid glance which the other gave him.

'At all events,' the latter resumed presently, 'she don't know that I know, and she don't know what I intend. It's not a pleasant business, altogether—understand? You know how I've been brought up. It isn't so easy for me to fall into the right sentiments as it might be for other men. And—I feel it to be a private matter : I ought to go about it alone, and in my own way. Now'—here he turned around, and changed his tone, watching the Professor's countenance as he spoke,

‘are you willing to leave it entirely in my hands?—promise not to question me, nor to speak to me, nor to anybody else, until it’s all settled?’

‘More than willing, my dear boy! more than satisfied; you shall have a clear field, that’s certain. I shan’t do anything—shan’t say a word, meanwhile: shall wait with perfect confidence till you’re ready to report, whenever and however you please.’

‘I should like to make you a present on my wedding day, in return for the parish, you know. Will that be soon enough?’ and the young man met the elder’s eye with a sharp look of significance.

‘No more fitting time, no more fitting time,’ replied Professor Valeyon. The old gentleman’s heart was full: he shifted the reins to his right hand, and laid his left upon Bressant’s, which he pressed with much feeling. Perhaps it was of bad omen thus to seal a bargain with the left hand, but no misgivings of the sort troubled the Professor. He felt more at ease than at any time since his pupil first sprang up the steps of the Parsonage porch.

But Bressant, if he were a child in the world

of the affections, was, in other respects, a man of exceptional shrewdness and comprehensive ability. Although he had never as yet turned his attention to business matters, he had every faculty and instinct required to make a successful business man. When he found his own interests deeply at stake, he may have had more than one motive for wishing to secure to himself a clear field. But Professor Valeyon was still as simple-hearted a soul—as quick to trust wherever his sympathies dictated, as ever in his younger days.

Bressant did not intend to deceive him, but then he had no irrevocably settled plans. He was not one of those who follow blindfold the promptings of any principle, simply because it chances to be a lofty one. Although passionate and hot of blood, he could believe that the greatest good might be made not inconsistent with the greatest comfort. He undoubtedly intended to do what honour, generosity, and his future father-in-law urged him to do; but it was less from an abstract love of virtue, than from an overmastering unwillingness to give up Sophie (his affection for whom was the most deeply-seated necessity of his nature—a fact

which must be borne in mind through all that follows), and also—this was likewise a consideration of the greatest weight: indeed Sophie alone counted for more—also, from a very confident conviction, that, after everything had been accomplished, according to the highest dictates of truth, and justice, and all that—he would not, to all intents and purposes, lose his fortune after all; that, whatever might be the legal disposition of it, all the enjoyments and benefits that it could confer would still be his, with the additional grace of having acted in a most lofty and self-sacrificing spirit; that, in short, and to use a homely illustration, he would be able to give away his cake and to eat it too.

After being safely landed at the boarding-house—Abbie was not at home at the moment—Bressant bade farewell to the Professor, and, assisted by the fat Irish servant girl, carried his box up to his room. It was neatly swept, dusted, and put in order: a bunch of fresh flowers upon the table: others in pots, upon the window-sill. Their fragrance gave a delicate tone to the atmosphere of the room, and perhaps penetrated more nearly to Bressant's heart than an hour full of unanswerable argu-

ments and exhortations. He turned to the fat servant, who stood smiling, and wiping her hands on her apron :

‘ Who brought these flowers ? Who arranged them here ? ’

‘ Sure and wasn’t it Abbie herself ! ’ replied the functionary, giving her mistress her Christian name, with true democratic freedom. ‘ More than that ; isn’t it herself has swept out the room every week, let alone dusting of it every day of her life ! which is not mentioning that the flowers has been exchanged every day likewise, and fresh put in the place of them, by reason that the old shouldn’t fade ; which is a fact unprecedented and unbeknown in my experience, which have been in this house nine year come St. Patrick’s Day—God bless him ! ’

Having thus delivered herself of what had evidently been weighing on her mind for weeks past, the fat servant girl stopped wiping her hands on her apron (without help of which praiseworthy act she could no more have talked, than a donkey with a heavy stone tied to his tail can bray), and turning herself about, waddled towards the door. Bressant hesitated a moment, passed his hand rapidly down over

his face and beard, and then, catching open the door just as the fat servant girl was closing it, he requested her to inform Abbie, when she came back, of his return, and tell her he would like to speak with her.

‘I’ll do it, sir ; rest easy,’ was the encouraging reply. ‘Faith, and it’s a handsome man he is, and a sweet lovely look he has out of his eyes; leastways now, which is, maybe, more than could be said when first he came here, three months ago, and looked that cold and sharp at a body as might make one shiver like. It’s likely his being going to marry Miss Sophie up to the Parsonage as has fetched a change in him ; which she’s a dear good girl ; and may they be happy—God bless the both of them !’ Thus soliloquising, the fat servant girl, apron in hand, descended the narrow stairs, and betook herself to the kitchen.

Bressant paced restlessly up and down his small room, stopping every minute or so to bend over the flower-pots in the window, or take a sniff from the bouquet on the table. His cheeks and forehead were flushed, and his eyes very brilliant. His lips worked incessantly against one another, and he held his hands now

clasped behind his back, now thrust into the pockets of his coat. But there was certainly a noble and a gentle light upon his features, different from their usual expression of dazzling intellectual efficiency, different from the passionate fire which Cornelia's presence had more than once caused to flicker over them, different even from the purer and deeper illumination which his love for Sophie sometimes kindled within him. A virtuous act stirs the soul by its own innate beauty, even when the motive is not all unselfish. It was probably the first time that precisely such a look had ever visited Bressant's face; and it was certainly a great pity that no one but a fat Irish servant girl should have had the privilege of beholding it there.

Presently, as he stood facing the door, he saw the latch lifted. The moment had come. Involuntarily he caught hold of the back of the chair, and drew in his breath.

Pshaw! only the fat servant again. Bressant bit his lip, stamped his foot upon the floor, and frowned.

The fat girl met these demonstrations with a fat smile, and extended to the young man a long, narrow envelope, laid crossways over the dirty palm of her large thick hand.

‘A letter!’ exclaimed she, resuming her apron as soon as her hand was at liberty. ‘A letter from New York I’m thinking it is; and sure the handwriting’s a lady’s, every bit of it; which I don’t know what Miss Sophie would be after saying if she should hear of it—nay, don’t fear me, sir, that I’d ever have the heart to be telling her of it! And it’s Abbie as fetched it, and the same bid me tell you as how she’d be after coming up here directly; she’ll be cleaning her face first, and removing her bonnet; which she’s always a right neat body, and it’s myself can testify, as has lived with her nine years and never had cause to complain, God bless her!’

When Bressant was alone, he sat down in the chair, with the letter between his fingers. On such slight hinges do our destinies turn. If Abbie had neglected to call at the post office, or if she had been satisfied to give the letter to the young man herself, instead of sending it to him five minutes beforehand, or if the writing of the letter had been delayed a few hours (how many *ifs* there always are in such cases!), Bressant would have had a far different fate, and this story would never have been written. But as it was, five fatal minutes intervened between

the delivery of the letter and Abbie's appearance, during which time he had read it through twice—at first hurriedly, the second time slowly and carefully—had replaced it in the envelope, and put the envelope in his pocket. Then he sat quite quiet, leaning back in his chair, his head thrown forward, his under eyelids drawn up and contracted around the piercing glance of his eyes, his jaws and lips set tight, and a straight line up his forehead from between his eyebrows. A more unpleasant and forbidding expression one does not often meet ; but, such as it was, it grew still more stern and unpromising when the door once more slowly opened, and Abbie appeared upon the threshold.

Nevertheless, he at once rose, and inclined forward his lofty shoulders in a remarkably courteous bow. Abbie, who showed some traces of discomposure, and held one finger nervously to her under lip, stepped into the room, and they shook hands.

‘I'm glad to welcome you back,’ said she, apparently unable to remove her eyes from his face. ‘You'll not likely find this place as convenient as the Parsonage, though.’

‘It's very pleasant ; these flowers are delight-

ful. I wanted to thank you for them ; it seems like home to be here.'

'Like home !' repeated Abbie. Her body seemed to bend and sway towards him, and the outer extremity of the eyebrows drooped a little, giving a singularly soft and gentle expression to her elderly visage. But seeing that he only coloured, turning his head aside, and fumbling with his beard, her expression changed into one of constraint, which appeared to stiffen on her features.

'I'm glad you like the flowers ; I didn't know as you cared for such things. I thought if you were ill they might be pleasant to you. But you're looking very well, sir, for one who has had so severe an accident.'

'Oh, yes ; I'm as well as ever. I've had very good nursing.'

'Yes—yes,' she said, slowly ; 'it was better you should be there ; you couldn't have been so well cared for here. I told Professor Valeyon so at the time. I knew you'd feel happier there—more at home. It's all for the best—all for the best, in the end.' She rattled the keys in her girdle before proceeding, with a distraught, embarrassed manner : 'By the way,

you had something more than good nursing to help you to health, I heard. Is it Cornelia—or Sophie?’

Bressant hesitated and stammered—a weakness he seldom was guilty of, especially when there was so little reason for it as at present.

‘It’s—I’m—oh!—Sophie!’ said he.

‘I heard it was Sophie, but I thought likely as not it was a mistake of one for another. Sophie,’ repeated she, musingly, ‘that sweet, delicate little angel. Oh! I should fear, I should fear! Cornelia would have been better—not so sensitive—she can bear more—and who knows?—No; but I do him wrong; he loves her: she’ll be happy; she can’t help it!’ Here Abbie became aware that she had been thinking aloud; her hand sought her mouth, and she glanced apprehensively at Bressant. But he had evidently heard nothing of the latter part of her speech, which was spoken in a low tone. He had taken a flower from the bunch on the table, and was pulling it ruthlessly to pieces. He did not look up. Abbie, rattling her keys, retired towards the door.

‘I’ll bid you good morning, sir. A house-keeper always must be busy, you know; and

of course you can't afford to be disturbed. You need never fear any disturbance from me—never, I assure you. By the way, you received your letter? I gave it to the servant, instead of waiting to bring it myself, because I thought it might be important.'

'Oh yes, I have it; no—no importance at all. Good morning.'

Abbie walked hurriedly and unevenly to her room, shut herself in, and fastened the door. She sat down on a chair which stood by the old-fashioned desk in the corner, and it seemed to her she could not rise from it again. A faintness was upon her, which she thought might, perhaps, be death. There was a sensation within her as if a clock had run down in her head, and had dropped the heavy weight into her heart. She could feel the paleness of her face, and the drops of moisture on her forehead. Her breathing was well-nigh imperceptible. She sat quite still, in a kind of awful expectation, as if listening for the echoless footfall of Death. But he passed by on the other side, and left her to face her life again.

She felt rather tired of it, as she sat up and looked dimly around her. Putting her hand in

the pocket of her dark dress, she drew out the small square morocco case which contained the daguerreotype. It was rather mortifying, certainly : everyone knows what it is to appear, dressed for a party, and find you have mistaken the night. In what pleasant little episode had Abbie flattered herself that this portrait, with its grave, dark, baby eyes, its soft, light curls, its slender, solemn little face, might be going to play a part ? No matter : the hope was gone by ; and every day the portrait faded more and more indistinguishably into the dark background. Abbie looked at it a moment or two only, then closed the case, and carefully fastened the two little hooks which kept it shut. Opening the old-fashioned desk, she put the daguerreotype in its little drawer, and locked it up. She held the key—a small brass key—between her finger and thumb, meditating. Presently she went to the window, opened it, and looked out. Beneath, a little to one side, stood a huge black water-butt, half buried in the earth, and partly full of rain-water, contributed by the tin spout whose mouth opened above it. Into this butt Abbie dropped the key. It struck the water with a faint pat, and disappeared, causing

two or three circles to expand to the edges of the butt, against which they disappeared also.

She did not immediately draw back, but remained leaning with her arms upon the window-sill. It was a beautiful, cool, September morning, such as makes breathing and eyesight luxurious. The fat Irish girl sat on the back steps, peeling potatoes for dinner. On the step by her side was a large earthen bowl, into which she put the potatoes, while throwing the skins into the swill-pail on her right. She was obliged to give her whole mind to the operation, there being a danger lest, in rapid working, she should happen to throw the potato into the swill-pail, and put the skin into the earthen bowl. She was much too absorbed to notice the beautiful weather, even had she been inclined to do so; but it remained beautiful, nevertheless.

‘I’d be a fool to find fault with him,’ said Abbie to herself. ‘How can I expect him to see anything in me, more than I can see myself in the looking-glass? And then, he loves Sophie, and perhaps he thinks I’d rob her; the Lord knows I only coveted the luxury of giving away my own, and seeing them happy with it. Well,

he may set his mind at rest; he shall never suffer the mortification of having to thank a boarding-house keeper for his fortune.

‘Oh! my boy—my dear, dear boy!’

Meanwhile Bressant, having been relieved, by the timely arrival of the letter, from any present necessity of visiting his aunt, was devoting himself pretty diligently to the cultivation of that line in his forehead, running perpendicularly up from between the eyebrows. It bade fair to become a permanent feature in his face]

CHAPTER V.

ARMED NEUTRALITY.

ONE afternoon in the cool heart of October, Cornelia and Sophie found themselves on the hill which rose up in front of the house, above the road, bound on a hunt for autumn leaves. They were alone. Bressant's time for coming was still an hour distant. A few nights before there had been a frost, which had inspired a rainbow soul into the woods; and the glory of the golden and crimson leaves made it imperatively necessary that they should be gathered and allowed to illuminate the dusky interior of the Parsonage.

Since Cornelia's return home, the sisters had not been so much together as formerly. Sophie had observed it, and secretly blamed herself: she allowed Bressant to monopolise her—left Cornelia out in the cold—was selfish and thoughtless just

because she was happy—and so forth : taking herself severely to task, and resolving to amend her behaviour forthwith. But there seemed to be some difficulty in the way of consummating her best intentions.

Cornelia was no longer so easily to be come at ; she did not volunteer herself now in the liberal, joyous way she used to do ; did not, in fact, appear half so ready to do her share in the work of reconstruction. It began to force itself upon Sophie, that the edifice of their former relations was not lightly to be rebuilt ; and the growth of this conviction occasioned her to mar her ordinarily serene and justly harmonised existence with sundry little fits of crying and other mournful indulgences.

As for Cornelia, if she noticed the estrangement at all, she did not allow it to occasion her any anxiety. Jealousy and discontent are more self-absorbing passions than love, and they closed her eyes to whatever they did not involve. Yet the effect of the estrangement was more hurtful upon her than upon Sophie ; for never had her pure-minded sister's influence been so needful to her as now, when the very nature of the malady forbade its being so relieved.

But this afternoon it had so happened that they found themselves together on the hill. Each had filled a basket with the most brilliant, or harmonious, or vividly contrasted colours they could find. They had emerged from the wood into the clear autumn sunshine which rested upon the hillside, and sat down upon a grey knee of rock, encased with crisp grey and black lichens. Below lay the Parsonage, with its weather-blackened, shingled roof, and the garden, full of shrubbery, intersected by winding paths, the fountain in the centre. The stony road wound around the spur of the hill, and was visible here and there, in its slopes and turnings on the way to the village, light buff between the many-coloured bordering of foliage. The winding valley looked like Nature's colour-box; the tall hills beyond, sleeping beneath their Persian shawls, contrasted richly with the cool pearl grey of the lower sky behind them. Away to the right, though seemingly nearer than from the road below, rose the white steeple of the meeting-house, and, peeping out around it, the roofs and gable ends of the village houses.

‘There could not be a more lovely place to

be happy in !' said Sophie, sighing from excess of pleasure.

'Any place is as lovely as another when you're in love, I suppose,' remarked her sister; 'that is, if being in love is as nice as poets say it is.'

Sophie looked around with a smile, implying that the best description a poet ever wrote could give but a faint impression of the reality.

'But,' pursued Cornelia, 'don't you find it very stupid when he's away? The happier you are with him, the unhappier you'd be without him, I should think.'

'Oh, no, dear !' returned Sophie. 'I'm happy mostly, because I know he cares for me more than for any one else in the world, and because I know he's one of the best and truest of men. I can feel that, you know, just as much when he's at Abbie's, as when he's here. The happiness of love isn't all in seeing and hearing, and—all that tangible part.'

'Don't it make any difference, then, if you never see one another from the day you're engaged until you're married?'

Sophie began to blush, as she generally did when called upon to speak of her love. 'Of course, it's delicious to be together,' said she,

‘and it would be very sad if we could not meet. But it would be more sad to think that our love depended on meeting.’

‘Well, it may be so to you,’ returned Cornelia, picking lichens from the rock and crushing them between her rounded fingers; ‘but my idea is that the whole object of being engaged and married is to be together all the time. I don’t see what on earth we are made visible and tangible for, unless to be seen and touched by the persons we love.’

Sophie looked distressed, and a little embarrassed.

‘You can’t think our bodies are the most important part of us, Neelie, dear? It’s our souls that love and are loved, you know. How could we love in Heaven if it were not so?’

‘Oh, I don’t know anything about that. It’s love in this world I’m speaking of. I believe it has as much to do with flesh and blood, as an instrument has with the music that it makes. What would become of the music if it wasn’t for the instrument?’

‘That’s a beautiful illustration, my dear,’ observed Sophie, after a thoughtful pause, ‘but I think it can be used better the other way.

The music of love, like other music, is an existence by itself, exclusive of the flesh and blood instruments, which weren't given us to create music, but to interpret it to our earthly senses. Our souls are the players; but in the next world we shall be able to perceive the harmony without need of any medium. We can remember music, too, and enjoy it, long after we have heard it—that is why we don't need to be always together. And yet it's always sweet to meet, to hear a new tune; and the number of tunes is infinite; so love needs all eternity to make itself complete.'

When Sophie hit upon an idea which seemed to her spiritually beautiful and harmonious, she was apt to be carried away—sometimes, perhaps, into deep water. Yet thus, occasionally, did she catch glimpses of higher truths than a broader and safer wisdom could have attained.

Cornelia took one of the glowing leaves out of her basket, and looked at it. Perhaps she saw, in the perfect earthly self-sufficiency of its splendour, something akin to herself.

'I suppose I don't half appreciate your theory, Sophie, though it's certainly pretty enough. But you're more soul than body, to

begin with, I believe. For my part, I almost think, sometimes, I could get along without any soul at all, and never feel the least inconvenience. Perhaps every body hasn't a soul—only a few favoured ones.'

'What is it gives you such thoughts, Neelie?' said her sister, in a tone which, had it not been charged with so much depth of feeling, would have been plaintive. Her grey, profound eyes, from a slight slanting upwards of the brows above them, took on an expression in harmony with her tone. 'I never knew you to have such, until lately.'

'I suppose, until lately, I didn't have any thoughts at all.'

There was a pause. Sophie looked away over the beautiful valley, but it could not drive the shadow of anxious and loving sorrow from her face. Cornelia busied herself selecting leaves from her basket, and arranging them in a bouquet. Like them, she was more vividly and variously beautiful since the frost.

'Do you think men's ideas of love, and such things, are as high as women's?' asked she, presently.

'Why shouldn't they be?' answered Sophie,

The music of love, like other music, is an existence by itself, exclusive of the flesh and blood instruments, which weren't given us to create music, but to interpret it to our earthly senses. Our souls are the players; but in the next world we shall be able to perceive the harmony without need of any medium. We can remember music, too, and enjoy it, long after we have heard it—that is why we don't need to be always together. And yet it's always sweet to meet, to hear a new tune; and the number of tunes is infinite; so love needs all eternity to make itself complete.'

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his unworthiness,' replied Sophie, her voice rising and clearing, while she regarded her sister with a full bright glance. 'As to hating him—I cannot hate anyone I have loved, Neelie.' She raised herself up as she spoke, and sat erect.

'Well, you're a strange girl!' said Cornelia, who was a little confused. 'I don't see how you can ever be either happy or unhappy. Nothing human seems to have any hold upon you.'

'I'm very human,' returned Sophie, shaking her head. 'There are some things, I think, would soon drive me out of the world, if God were to send them to me.'

The idea of death, when brought home to Cornelia, never failed to affect her. If she had been planning the destruction of an enemy, she would have wept bitterly at the sight of that enemy's dead body; nay, even at a vivid account of his death. Sophie's words brought tears to her eyes at once, and a quaver into her voice.

'Don't—please don't talk that way, dear; it isn't so easy to die as you think, I'm sure. The idea of dying because anybody was wicked!

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not think it likely that to lose him would occasion Sophie anything more than a temporary and comparatively trifling degree of suffering. If she could allow her love for him to depend upon the immaculateness of his moral character, she did not love him as much as Cornelia, to whose affection any considerations of that kind were immaterial. What, after all, was Sophie's love but an idealisation, which had, to be sure, taken Bressant as its object, but which placed no vital dependence upon him? But Cornelia's love was to her a matter of life and death: she was quite convinced that to live without Bressant would be an impossibility.

The next question was, whether Bressant was really as good as Sophie believed him to be? Cornelia did not think he was. Perhaps a secret sense of his attitude towards her suggested her suspicions; perhaps they were the result of her New York experience, which had taught her just enough about men to make her imagine there was more or less of dark and indefinite villainy in the composition of all of them; perhaps it was her wish that fathered her moral misgivings about him: for it must

be confessed that Cornelia was very far from shrinking at the idea of seeing her suspicions verified.

Indeed, was it not on all accounts desirable, that whatever objectionable points and passages the young man's life-record contained, should be at once forthcoming? Cornelia could not restrain a feeling of satisfaction at the growing conviction that it would be doing Sophie a kind and friendly service to inform her, in time, what a reprobate she was about to marry—if he only could be proved a reprobate! This question of proof was the only one difficulty in Cornelia's way; all the rest was as clear and easy as is generally the case in such matters.

It would not do to lie about it: Cornelia had a natural, if not a moral disinclination to falsehood, and was moreover acute enough to see how strong, in this case, would be the chances of detection. It was not likely that Sophie would accept upon hearsay any imputations or accusations against her lover: she would speak to Bressant at once; the lie would be revealed, and the result would be not only a failure to alienate Sophie from him, but a certainty of alienating him from Cornelia.

No—her reliance must be placed upon facts. Whatever she could hear to the young man's disadvantage, that was true, beyond the possibility of his denial, that she must at once make known to Sophie : it was no less than her duty. Or—better still !—why would it not be enough simply to inform Bressant of her dark discovery, and compel him, by the threat of revelation, to give up Sophie of his own accord ! Cornelia, in congratulating herself upon this shrewd idea, did not perceive how entirely it transformed the whole aspect and spirit of her intention.

So much being arranged, the next thing was to put herself in the way of learning the objectionable truths which she had persuaded herself existed. This was rather an awkward point. How should she go to work ? to whom apply ? who would be most likely to know, or, knowing, to impart what Cornelia desired to hear ? Aunt Margaret ? but it was not certain that she knew anything about him more than the little Cornelia had herself told her : if not useless, it would certainly be rash to make inquiries of her, especially since it would have to be done by letter. Aunt Margaret wouldn't do.

Her Papa ? No, no ! that was quite out of

the question. He might not approve—he was old-fashioned—he wouldn't understand the necessity—he might ask her disagreeable questions—and besides!—no, he must be given up.

But besides Aunt Margaret, and Professor Valeyon, who was there? Cornelia was quite at a loss. To think of being obliged to give up the whole explosion, merely for want of a match to touch off the powder—that was unendurable! She would not give it up: she would let herself be guided by circumstances; something would be sure to turn up that would serve her purpose; she must be on the alert, that was all, and let things take their course. One thing troubled her—the day of the wedding was not much over two months distant! Everything must be done before then. It was to be hoped that things would take their course with a reasonable degree of rapidity.

As regarded the favourable result to herself of Bressant's separation from Sophie, Cornelia seems never to have entertained a doubt. That he would fall into a state of despair, and of bitterness against all women, herself included, she was unable, consistently with her confidence in herself, to believe. Far more natural

was it, that, finding Sophie no longer could care for him, he would seek to repose and refresh his heart elsewhere: and where so soon as with Cornelia? Indeed it was a mystery to her how he had ever come to care for Sophie at all: and the reason of the mystery was, that she had felt a movement of passion in him towards herself. There was certainly not much similarity between the sisters, and it was not strange that Cornelia should be inclined to doubt the validity of her rival's claim to supremacy in Bressant's heart.

Her rival! The current of events had already carried Cornelia a considerable distance beyond her position on the evening of her return from New York, when she had excused her beautiful appearance, to herself, by suggesting that it would not do for the husband of her sister to detest her! That was sophistry, and it was sophistry that served her now; but the subjects upon which she exercised it were becoming hourly more and more ticklish. The woman of two weeks back would have started and turned pale before the woman of to-day.

It would be very funny—if it were not so

deep a tragedy—the havoc bungling human fingers make in essaying the work of Providence. No one but God can know how delicate are the petals of his flowers, nor on what depend their bloom and fragrance. Hearts are sacred things ; we should beware of meddling, not alone with others' but with our own.

CHAPTER VI.

A BIT OF INSPIRATION.

BRESSANT was in the habit of spending three hours every afternoon at the Parsonage. Part of this time was passed in the Professor's study, pursuing theological lore; for, whatever the young man's ultimate expectations with regard to his career and fortune may have been, it was no part of his plan to allow his future father-in-law to suspect anything else than what he had already given him to understand.

After lessons were over he joined Sophie on the balcony, walked with her in the garden, or gave her his arm up the hill. Cornelia was seldom to be seen, at least within speaking distance. At the same time she did not keep entirely out of the way. Often, when wandering with her sister through the garden paths,

Bressant would catch a glimpse of her buoyant figure and rich-toned face upon the balcony ; or, if himself established there, would presently behold her, in a garden hat and shortened skirt, raking the fallen leaves off the paths and flower-beds, and perhaps trundling them stoutly away in a wheel-barrow afterwards. It thus happened that, although seldom exchanging a word with her, he was continually receiving fresh reminders of her, in one way or another ; and he was moreover haunted by an idea that Cornelia was not unconscious that he was observing her.

Two or three days subsequent to Cornelia's conversation with Sophie on the hill top, Bressant, on his afternoon way to the Parsonage, met the former coming in the opposite direction. It was nearly at the end of the long level stretch, which was now resplendent with many-coloured maples, which were interspersed at short intervals between the willows. He had been walking swiftly with his eyes on the ground, when, chancing to raise them, he saw Cornelia walking on towards him.

How beautifully she trod, erect, her round chin held in, stepping daintily yet firmly : it seemed as if the earth were an elastic sphere

beneath her feet, she moving tirelessly onward. She had plucked a branch of gorgeous leaves from one of the maples, which she brandished about ever and anon, to keep the flies away. A straw hat, narrow-brimmed, slanted downwards over hair and forehead. Her oval cheeks were more than usually luminous from exercise: her eyes were bright tawny brown, the lids shaped in curves, like the edges of a leaf. The vigorous roundness of her full and perfect figure was hinted here and there through the light drapery of her dress, as she walked forwards. The October breeze seemed the sweeter for blowing past her.

‘You must be rather late—I don’t often meet you!’ said she, with a smile which put Bressant traitorously at his ease.

‘Early, more than late,’ responded he, stopping as he saw that she stopped.

‘Are you?—well, then—I don’t often see you—would you mind walking with me just a little way?’ and she touched him lightly on the shoulder with her maple branch, as with the wand of an enchantress.

He, in obedience rather to the touch than the words, turned about and walked beside her.

‘I’ve a right to a sister’s privileges, you know,’ continued she, slipping her hand beneath his arm, and letting it rest upon it.

How very delightful, as well as simple, to solve the problem of their intercourse on this basis! Bressant did not know how it might feel to have a sister, but he could, at the moment, imagine nothing more delightful than to be Cornelia’s brother—unless it were to be Sophie’s husband. But to be both!

‘Do you know,’ pursued she, with apparent hesitation, looking up in his face, and then immediately looking down again, ‘I’ve had a notion since coming back from New York, that you don’t like me so well as you did?’

This might be either audacity or delicacy, as one chose to take it. Bressant, feeling himself put rather on the defensive, answered hastily and without premeditation,

‘I like you more!’

‘Oh! I’m so glad to hear you say so!’ exclaimed she warmly, and as she spoke he felt her hand a little more perceptibly on his arm. ‘It takes such a load off my heart! seeing you and Sophie love one another so much I couldn’t help loving you too, in my way; and it made

me so unhappy to think I was disagreeable to you.'

Bressant was quite unprepared for all this. Whatever had been his speculations as to the future footing upon which he and Cornelia should stand, it had been nothing like that she was now furnishing. It did not seem at all in the vein which she had opened on the day of her return. He was puzzled: had he been more used to ladies' society, he would have mistrusted her sincerity.

'You could never be disagreeable to me!' was his answer: and he looked down at her oval cheek, with his first attempt at fraternal admiration. It turned out badly. She looked unexpectedly up: his glance fell through her tawny eyes, and sank down, burning deliciously, into her heart. She turned pale with the pain and the pleasure: but it was such pain and pleasure that she sought, and wanted more of.

'Well, then! it's all clear between us again—is it?' resumed she, drawing a long breath, which sounded more like the irrepressible outcome of a tumultuous heart, than a sigh of relieved suspense upon the point in question. 'No more misunderstandings, or any thing?

and you won't get out of the way any more, as if I were poison—will you ?'

'I never did!' protested he, laughing awkwardly. In the last few minutes he had developed a sentiment hitherto unknown to him:—pique ! He had been imagining Cornelia in love with him, and angry at his preference for Sophie; whereas it would now seem that the only reason she cared for him at all, was because he was Sophie's lover: a most correct spirit in her, no doubt; but instead of being gratified, as was his duty, he felt provoked.

'Oh ! yes, you behaved shockingly !' rejoined Cornelia, laughing with him. 'Mind ! I don't care how devoted you are to Sophie—the more the better ; but when you do notice me, I want you to do it kindly—won't you ?'

'I'll be sure to, now that I know you care anything about it.'

'And what made you think I didn't care about it, if you please, sir ?'

'Why,' stammered he, quite at a loss what to say, and so coming out with the truth, 'I thought you were offended at my being engaged to Sophie ?'

'But what should there be in that to offend

me?' demanded Cornelia, with the mouth and eyes of Innocence.

'I don't know:—well—I knew you first!' he blurted forth, beginning to wish he had been satisfied to hold his tongue.

Cornelia took her breath once or twice, and then bit it off on her under lip, as if about to say something, and afterwards hesitating about it.

'I don't quite understand you,' she managed to get out at last: 'do you—forgive me if I'm wrong—but perhaps you're thinking of that time—when—just before I went away?'

Saying this she drooped her eyes in a confusion which, because more than half of it was genuine, made her look very fascinating. Nothing is more seductive than a little truth. As Bressant looked at her, and thought of what he had done at that last interview, soft thrills crept sweetly through his blood, and he felt a most extraordinary tenderness for her.

'I've often thought of it,' answered he, in a tone which did not belie his words.

'Well—so have I, to tell the truth!' rejoined Cornelia, looking up for a moment with fine candour. 'But we won't either of us

think of it any more, will we? It seems very long ago, now : and it'll never be again, and we ought to forget it ever was at all. ' But, oh ! most of all you must forget it, if it will ever be a reason for your disliking me, or wishing not to see me ! I know how disagreeable it must be to you to think of it now.'

Did Cornelia know what she was about ? had she netted beforehand all the meshes of this web she was throwing over him ? the admirable mixture of frankness and subtlety, nature and art—must not it have been planned and calculated beforehand, to bewilder and mislead ?—It may well be doubted. No preconceived and elaborated programme can come up to the inspiration of the moment, which is genius. Such felicitous wording of subject-matter so objectionable : such an unassailable presentation of so indefensible a principle—could hardly have been the fruit of premeditation. Cornelia was allowing things to take their course.

' It isn't disagreeable ! it's—' Bressant broke off, unable or unprepared to say what it was. ' Why must we forget it ? ' he added, with a half-assured look of significance : ' You said we were brother and sister, you know ! ' .

She laughed in his face, at the same time drawing her hand from his arm, and stepping away from him. How tantalisingly lovely she looked!

‘It won’t do to carry the privileges of relationship too far, my dear sir! at least not until after you’re married. There! go back to your Sophie—I didn’t mean to keep you so long—really! ‘No, no!’ as he made an offer to approach her; ‘Go! and be quick, I advise you. Good bye!’

Bressant, as he walked on to the Parsonage, was possessed by an undefined conviction that he was learning a great deal, not set down in the books. The page of the passions, once thrown open, seems to comprise everything. The world has but one voice for the man of one idea.

Evidently this man did not comprehend the nature of his position between these two women. Reason told him it was impossible he could love both at once; but there her information stopped. His senses assured him that, with Cornelia, he experienced a vivid rush of emotion, such as Sophie, strongly as he loved her, never awakened in him; but his senses could

give him no explanation of the fact. His instinct whispered that he would not have dared, in his most ardent moments, to feel towards Sophie as he invariably felt towards her sister; but no instinct warned him of the danger which this implied. A sturdy principle, if it had not thrown light upon the question, would at least have pointed out to him the true course to adopt: but, unfortunately, principles, and the impulses which they are formed to control, are neither of simultaneous nor proportionate growth. Bressant, while partaking so liberally of emotional food, had quite neglected to provide himself with the necessary and useful correctives to such indulgences. Thus it happened that when he arrived, a little past his usual hour, at the parsonage door, his mental digestion was in a very disturbed condition.

In palliation of Cornelia's conduct, there is little or nothing to be adduced. Strong forces had been labouring within her during the last few months. Love, disappointment, a passionate nature, a sense of wrong—not least, her New York experience—had developed, warped, and transformed her. Bressant's homage had been

the first, of any value to her, which she had ever received : it had come unasked and unexpected, and had been all the more attractive because there was something not quite regular about it. Being lost, she had felt a fierce necessity for repossessing it, under whatever form, under whatever name. To-day, it was but the turn of the conversation that had suggested the expedient of calling herself his sister.

The very beauty and purity of the fraternal relation cloaks the miserable rottenness of the imitation. So innocent does it seem, it might almost deceive the parties to the deception themselves. 'I may love him, for I'm his sister !' said Cornelia ; but could she in reality have become his sister, she would beyond all else have shrunk from it. 'Nothing I do is in itself an impropriety,' she could say : but her secret sense and motive were enough to make the most innocent act criminal. She closed her ears to the inner voice ; and her eyes, looking at her conduct only through the crimson glass of her desire, pronounced it good.

She walked swiftly, immersed in thought, along the October road, beneath the splendid canopy, and over the gorgeous strewn carpet,

of the dying trees. She was going to call on Abbie, it having occurred to her that perhaps the kind of information she wanted concerning Bressant might be forthcoming there. Presently, the rapid rise in the road at the end of the level stretch checked the current of her ideas and threw them into confusion. Out of the confusion, rose unexpectedly, one.

Cornelia stopped in her walk with one foot advanced, her head thrown up, her finger on her chin. She looked like a glorious young sibyl, reading a divine prophecy upon the clouds. After a moment, she waved her autumn banner over her head with a gesture of triumph, and, turning on her heel, began to walk back towards home.

The grandest discoveries are so simple ! Cornelia laughed to think how blind she had been—how stupid ! What a sense of power and independence was hers now ! To turn homewards had been instinctive. So strong was the sense of an end gained—a point settled—that, whatever may have been the actual errand on which she had started, she felt that her work for that day, at least, was done.

She had been planning and speculating,

and worrying to discover a safe and sure method of separating Bressant and her sister. Peering into the past, for materials, and searching on one side or another for sources of information, she had overlooked all that was best and nearest at hand. What need for her to scrape together a reluctant tale of what had been? for was not the future her own? Why rely for assistance upon this or that suspicious and unsatisfactory witness? What more, trustworthy one could she find than herself? Suppose Bressant never to have done anything that could make him unworthy of Sophie; was that a bar against his doing something in the future?

Yes; she had power over him, and would use it. She herself would be the means and the cause for attaining the end at which she aimed. She would be the accomplice of his indiscretion, and thus obtain over him a double advantage. No matter how intrinsically trifling the indiscretion might be, it would be just such a one as would be sure to weigh heavily in the balance of Sophie's pure judgment. So plain would this be to Bressant himself, that Cornelia would be able to rule him (as she argued)

merely with the threat of accusation. And since his desertion of Sophie would appear to her causeless, the indignation she would feel thereat would save her from repining. Cornelia would have him all to herself!

Well! and what would she do with him when she had him? She did not stop to consider. Nor, going on thus from step to step, did she have a sense of the hideousness of the wrong she contemplated.

CHAPTER VII.

/
 ANOTHER INTERMISSION.

It was something of a surprise to Bressant, after his interview with Cornelia, that she still continued to avoid him. But after what she had said to him to set his mind at rest regarding the spirit and manner of their intercourse, she felt an intuition that it would be as well he should believe that she herself was not over-anxious to be on any terms with him whatever.

Still, he often saw her and always carried away a charming impression of what he saw. Once, she had mounted a chair in the library, and was in the act of reaching down a book from a high shelf, when he entered unexpectedly. She turned, caught his eye, and dimpled into a mischievous smile. All day he could not drive the picture out of his head; the bounteous, graceful form, the heavy, dark,

lustreless hair, the fascinating face, and the smile. He had but just left Sophie; yet the fine chords she had struck in him were drowned in Cornelia's sensuous melody.

Again, one day, coming into the house he chanced to enter the parlour, and there sat Cornelia in an easy-chair, her feet stretched out upon a stool, fast asleep. He came close up to her, and stood looking. What artist could ever have hoped to reproduce the warmth, glow, and richness of colour and outline? He watched her, feeling it to be a stolen pleasure, yet a nameless something surging up within him compelled him to remain. In another moment—who can calculate a man's strength and weakness?—he might have stooped to kiss her, with no brother's kiss! But in that moment she awoke, and perhaps surprised his half-formed purpose in his eyes.

She was too clear-headed to regret having awaked, for she saw that he regretted it. And because he did not venture, she being awake, to take the kiss, she knew he was no brother, and knew not what it was to be one. So she put on a look of annoyance, and told him petulantly to go about his business. Off he went, and passed

his hour with Sophie, who was as lovely, as fresh, as purely transparent as ever. But some turbid element had been stirred in Bressant's depths, which spoilt his enjoyment for that day, making him moody and silent.

Such little incidents—there were many of them—were far too simple and natural to be the work of deliberation and forethought. But Cornelia was disposed to use them, when they did occur, to her best possible advantage, and therefore they acquired potency to affect Bressant. She wished that to be, which he had not stamina enough to oppose; thus a subtle bond was established between them, lending a significance to the most ordinary actions, such as could never have been recognised between indifferent persons.

This was all progress for Cornelia, and she well knew it, and yet she was not at ease nor satisfied. She began to find out that it was no such light matter to usurp the place of such a woman as Sophie, though the latter was labouring under the great disadvantage of being ignorant of the plot against her. In most cases, indeed, the attempt would have been well nigh hopeless, but Cornelia had two exceptionally

powerful allies—her own supreme beauty, and Bressant's untrained and ill-regulated animal nature, which he had not yet learnt to understand and provide against. And there was another thing in her favour, too, although she knew it not—the demoralising effect upon the young man's character of his failure to fulfil his agreement with the professor. The evils that are in us link themselves together to drag us down, their essential quality being identical, whatever their particular application.

Nevertheless, time went on, and November had stalked shivering away before the frosty breath of December, and still Cornelia had accomplished nothing definite; nay, she scarcely felt sufficiently sure of her footing to attempt anything. And what was it that she was to attempt? On looking this question in the face, at close quarters—it wanted less than four weeks now of that wedding-day which Cornelia had promised herself should see no wedding!—when she found herself pressed so peremptorily as this for an answer, it might be imagined that she turned pale at what was before her. And, indeed, the prospect, viewed in its best light, was discouraging and desperate enough. For

at what price to herself must success be bought? and at what sacrifice be enjoyed? She must either lose, or deserve to lose, all that a woman ought to hold most sacred and most dear—home, the esteem and love of friends, the protection of truth, and, above all, and worst of all, her own self-respect. All these in exchange for a baffled, angry, selfish man, at whose mercy she would be, with only one word to speak in self-defence and justification; and it was much to be feared that he would, considering the circumstances, reject and scoff at even that. The one word was—she loved him! and if there be any redeeming virtue in it, let her, in Heaven's name, have the benefit thereof. She can rely on nothing else.

But Cornelia would not be disheartened. If she saw the rocks ahead, against whose fatal shoulders she was being swept—if she heard, dinning in her ears, the rush and roar of the headlong, irresistible rapids—if her eyes could penetrate the void which opened darkly beyond—she only nerved herself the more resolutely, her glance was all the firmer, her determination the more unfaltering. The peril in which she stood but kindled in her heart a fiery depth

of passion, such as overtopped and tamed the very terrors of her position. Because she must lose the world to gain her end, that end was exalted, in her thought, above a hundred worlds. The faculties of her soul, which, in her time of innocence and indifference, had been dormant—half alive—now sprang at once into an exalted, fierce vitality. The hour of evil found Cornelia a creature of far higher powers, and more vigorous development, than she could ever, under any other conditions, have attained. She showed most gloriously and greatly, when illuminated by that lurid light whose flame was fed by all that was most gentle, womanly, and sweet within her. She looked nearest to a goddess, when she needed but one step to be transformed into a demon.

In following out her psychological progress, we have necessarily outstripped, to some extent, the sober pace of the narrative. It was about the 1st of December that rumours began to be circulated in the village of an approaching ball at Abbie's. It was to be the grandest—the most complete in all its appointments—of any that ever had been given there. It was looked upon, in advance, as the great event of the

year. Real, formal invitations were to be sent out, printed on a fold of note paper, with the blank left for the name, and R. S. V. P.—whatever that might mean—in the lower left-hand corner. There were to be six pieces in the band; dancing was to be from eight to four, instead of from seven to twelve, as heretofore; and the toilets, it was further whispered, were to be exceptionally brilliant and elaborate. Certain it was that dressmaking might have been seen in progress through the windows of any farm-house within ten miles; and at the Parsonage no less than elsewhere.

Sophie had an exquisite taste in costume, though her ideas, if allowed full liberty, were apt to produce something too fanciful and eccentric to be fashionably legitimate. But let a dress once be made up, and happy she whose fortune it was to stand before Sophie and be touched off. Some slight readjustment or addition she would make which no one else could have thought of, but which would transform merely good or pretty into unique and charming. Sophie had the masterly simplicity of genius, but was generally more successful with others than with herself.

As for Cornelia, she knew how she ought to look : but how to effect what she desired was sometimes beyond her ability. She had little faculty for detail, relying on her sister to supplement this deficiency. She was more of a conformist than was Sophie in regard to toilette matters ; and—an important virtue not invariable with young ladies—she always could tell when she had on anything becoming.

One December day, when a broad, pearl-grey sky was powdering the motionless air with misty snow, the sisters sat together at their sewing in what had been known, since his accident, as Bressant's room. There was no stove ; but a rustling, tapering fire was living its ardent, yellow, wavering life upon the brick hearth, and four or five logs of birch and elm were reddening and crackling into embers beneath its intangible intensity. It made a grateful contrast to the soft, cold bank of snow that lay, light and round, upon the outside sill and the slighter ridges that sloped and clung along the narrow foot-hold of the window-pane frames.

Presently Cornelia got up from the low stool on which she had been sitting, and having

slipped on the waist of her new dress, invited Sophie's criticism with a curtsey.

'Dear me, Neelie!' exclaimed she, in gentle consternation, 'Are you going to wear your corsage so low as that?'

'Yes—why not!' returned Cornelia, with a kind of defiance in her tone: 'it's the fashion, you know. Oh! I've seen them lower than that in New York.'

'But there'll be nothing like it here, dear, I'm sure. Think how frightened poor Bill Reynolds will be when he sees you.' Sophie looked up, expecting to see her sister smile; but she having in view the opinion of quite another person than Mr. Reynolds, remained unusually grave.

'Don't mind me, dear,' Sophie added, fearing she might have given offence. 'You know I'd rather see you look well than myself; especially as I may not be here to see you another year.' She drew a long breath of happy regret, thinking of what was to follow the next day but one after the ball.

Cornelia, looking into the fire, her pure round chin resting on her bent forefinger, started, as the same thought entered her mind.

Was it so near, though—that marriage? or would an eternity elapse ere Bressant and Sophie called one another husband and wife?

‘Are you glad the day comes so soon, Sophie?’

‘Yes,’ answered she, with quiet simplicity. ‘A few weeks ago it frightened me—it seemed so near; but not now. I love him much more than I did—that’s one reason. And he loves me more, I think.’

‘Loves you more! why? what makes you think so?’ demanded Cornelia, a frown quivering across her forehead.

‘His manner tells me so: he’s more subdued and gentle; almost sad, indeed, sometimes. He’s lived so much in his mind since we were engaged: I can see it in his face, and hear it in his voice, even. He’s not like other men; I never want him to be; he has all that makes other men worth anything, and still is himself. He has the greatest and the warmest heart that ever was; but when he first came here he had no idea how to use it, nor even what it was for.’

‘And he’s found out now, has he?’

‘Yes—especially in the last few weeks. Before, he used sometimes to be violent, almost:—

to lose command of himself; but he never does now.'

'But doesn't he ever tell you that he loves you more than ever?'

'We understand each other,' replied Sophie, with a slight touch of reserve, for she thought she was being questioned further than was entirely justifiable. 'Nothing he could say would make me feel his love more than I do.'

Cornelia smiled to herself with secret derision; she imagined she could give a more plausible reason for her sister's reticence. She took off her 'waist' and resumed her place upon the stool.

'What should you do, Sophie, supposing something occurred to prevent your marriage?'

'Die an old maid,' returned she: not treating the question seriously, but as a piece of Cornelia's wanton idleness.

Cornelia began to laugh, but interrupted herself, half-way, with a sob. She was seized by a fantasy that if Sophie died an old maid her sister would have been the cause of it—would be a murderess! The sudden jarring of this idea—tragical enough, even without the ghastly spice of reality that there was about it—against the ludicrous element with which tradition flavors

the name of old maid—caught the young woman at unawares, and threw her rudely out of her nervous control. It was a result which could scarcely have happened, had she been less morbidly and unnaturally excited and strained to begin with ; as it was, it may have been an outbreak which had long been brewing, and to which Sophie's answer had but given the needful stimulus.

The sob was succeeded by a convulsion of painful laughter, that would go on the more Cornelia tried to stop it. At last, in gasping for breath, the laughter gave way to an outburst of tears and sobs, which seemed, in comparison, to be a relief. But at the first intermission, the discordant laughter came again : she hid her face in her hands, and made wild efforts to control herself : she slipped from her stool, and flung herself at full length upon the floor. Now, the paroxysms of laughing and crying came together, her body was shaken, strained, and convulsed in every part : she was breathless, flushed, and faint. But it seemed as if nothing short of unconsciousness could bring cessation : the sobs still tore their way out of her bosom, and the

laughter came with a terrible wrench that was more agonising to hear than a groan.

Sophie had never seen Cornelia in hysterics before, and was tortured with alarm and apprehension. She knew not what to do, for every attempt she made to relieve her, seemed only to make her worse.

‘Let me call papa—he must be somewhere in the house—he will know what to do!’ she said, at last, trembling and white.

‘No! no!’ cried Cornelia: and the shock of fear lest her father should see her, overcame the grasp of the hysterical paroxysm. She half raised herself on one arm, showing her face, red and disfigured, the veins on the forehead standing out, full and throbbing. ‘Come back! come back!’ for Sophie had her hand on the door.

She returned, in compliance with her sister’s demand, and knelt down beside her on the floor. Cornelia let herself fall back, her head resting on Sophie’s knee, in a state of complete exhaustion. There she lay, panting heavily; and a clammy pallor gradually took the place of the deeply stained flush. But the fit was over: by-and-bye she sat up, sullenly shunning Sophie’s touch, and appearing to shrink even at the sound of her voice. Finally, she rose inertly to

her feet, attempting to moisten her dry lips, walked once or twice aimlessly to and fro across the room, and ended by sitting down again upon her stool, and taking up her sewing.

‘Are you all well again, dear?’ asked Sophie, timidly.

‘Better than ever,’ replied Cornelia, with a short laugh, which had no trace of hysteria about it.

There was, however, a slight, but decided change in her manner, which did not pass away: a sort of hardness and impenetrability: and so incorporated into her nature did these traits seem, that one would have supposed they had always been there. Some unpleasant visitors take a surprisingly short time to make themselves at home.

But Sophie, seeing that her sister soon recovered her usual appearance, did not allow herself to be disturbed by any uncalled-for anxieties. Love, at its best, has a tendency to absorb and pre-occupy those whom it inspires: if not selfish, it is of necessity self-sufficient and exclusive. Sophie was too completely permeated with her happiness, to admit of being long overshadowed by the ills of those less blessed

than herself. Not that she had lost the power to sympathise with misfortune, but the sympathy was apt to be smiling rather than tearful. She was alight with the chaste, translucent, wondering joy of a maiden before her marriage :— the delicate, pearl-tinted brightness that pales the stars, before the reddening morning brings on the broader daylight.

She was not of those who, in fair weather, are on the look out for rain : she believed that God had plenty of sunshine, and was generous of it : and that the possibilities of bliss were unlimited. She was not afraid to be perfectly happy. A little sunny spot, in a valley, which no shadow has crossed all day long, was like her : there seemed to be nothing in her soul that needed shadow to set it right.

Cheerfulness was soon re-established, therefore, so far as she was concerned ; and the remembrance of Cornelia's distracting seizure presently yielded to the throng of light-footed thoughts that were ever knocking for admittance at her heart's door. Once afterwards, however, the event was recalled to her memory, by the revelation of its cause. Little that happens in our lives would seem trifling to us, could we trace it, forwards or backwards, to the end.

CHAPTER VIII.

BRESSANT TAKES A VACATION.

FRIDAY, December thirtieth, was the day appointed for Abbie's ball, and the morning of the twenty-eighth had already dawned. Bressant stood, with his arms folded, at the window of his room, watching the downfall of a thickening snow-storm which had set in the previous midnight. There had evidently been no delay or intermission in the cold, white, -silent business : to look out of doors was enough to make the flesh seem thin upon the bones.

In spite of the snow, however, the little room was feverishly hot, owing to the gigantic exertions of the small iron cylinder-stove. The round aperture over the little door was glowing red, like an enraged eye ; and the quivering radiation of the heat from the polished black surface was plainly perceptible to the sight.

The room had lost something of the neat and fastidious appearance which it had worn a few months before. The coloured drawing of a patent derrick, fastened to the wall by a tack at each corner of the paper, had broken loose at one end, and was curling over on itself like a withered leaf. The string by which the ingenious almanac had been suspended over the mantelpiece was broken, letting the almanac neatly down into the crevice between the wall and a couple of fat dictionaries, which lay, one on top of the other, upon the ledge. It was quite hidden from view, with the exception of one corner, which was a little tilted upwards, showing the hole through which the faithless string had passed.

The terrestrial and astronomical globes bore the appearance of not having revolved for a long time. A part of the pictured surface of the latter had scaled off, disclosing a blank whiteness beneath. Even the heavens, it seemed, were a sham : nothing more than a varnished painting upon a plaster-of-Paris foundation. The flower pots still stood in the windows, but hot air and an irregular water-supply had made sad inroads upon the beauty

of the plants. The lower leaves were turned brown: some of them had fallen off, and lay—poor little unburied corpses—upon the narrow circle of earth which, having failed to keep life green within their cells, now denied to them the right of sepulture. A few of the topmost sprouts still struggled to keep up a parody of verdure, and one or two faded flowers had not yet forsaken their calices—a silly piece of devotion on their part! Icy little blasts, squeezing in through the crevices of the window-sash, whistled about the forlorn stalks, cutting and venomous. The poor flowers would never see another summer; better give up at once!

Even the books which met the eye on every side, wore a deserted air. Not that they were dusty, for the chambermaid did her duty, if Bressant failed in his; but there was something in the heavy, methodical manner of their sleeping upon one another, such as they could never have settled into had they been recently disturbed or opened. The outside of a book is often as eloquent, in its way, as any part of the contents.

Bressant's arms were folded, and the perpendicular line up from between the eyebrows

was quite in harmony with the rest of his appearance. He was weary, harassed, and divided against himself. Insincerity made him uncomfortable : it compelled continual exertion, and of a paltry and degrading kind ; and it gave neither a sense of security, nor a prospect of future advantage. Five days from now he was to be married ; the duties of a parish minister were to be undertaken, and he felt himself neither mentally nor morally fitted or inclined for the office. Five days from now the Professor would expect from him that gift at which he had hinted during their drive ; and he had done nothing, either in act or purpose, to fulfil his promise concerning it.

He was cut off from all sympathy. How could he confide to Sophie the very wrong he meditated against herself—the very deception he was practising upon her father ? And what other person in the world was there to whom he might venture to betake himself ? Cornelia !—not yet ! he dared not yet yield himself to the influence he felt she was exercising over him : the surrender implied too much ; matters had not gone far enough. But did there not lurk, in the bottom of his heart, a presentiment that it was to her alone he would hereafter be able

to look for countenance and comfort? And would he avail himself of the refuge? When those whom their friends—whether justly or not—have abandoned, chance to stumble upon some oasis of unconditional affection, they are not squeamish about its source or orthodoxy: if the sentiment be sincere and hearty, that is enough. In the present case, moreover, Cornelia, as a last resort, was by no means so uninviting an object as she might have been.

But since the question lay between his fortune and Falsehood on one side, and a wife and Truth on the other, how was it possible for him to pause in his decision? Undoubtedly, had the young man once fairly admitted to himself that his choice lay between these two bare alternatives, he would have been spared much of the misery arising from casuistry and duplicity. But people are loth to acknowledge any course to be, beyond all appeal, right or wrong: they amuse themselves with fancying some modification—some new condition—some escape: anything to get away from the grim face of the inevitable. Bressant, for instance, might surely succeed in consummating his marriage with Sophie, no matter what else he left undone: and that being once irrevocably on

his side of the balance, all that was vital to his happiness was secure ; by a quick stroke he might capture the fortune likewise, and could then afford to laugh at the world.

This scheme, however, otherwise practical enough, involved a fallacy in its most important point. A marriage so contracted, with a woman of Sophie's character, could by no possibility turn out a happy or even endurable union. She would not be likely long to survive it ; if she did, it would be to suffer a life more painful than any death : for no one depended more than Sophie upon integrity and nobility in those she loved ; and the break in her family relations would be another source of agony to her, and of consequent remorse and misery to her husband. No : to bind her life to his, unless he could also compel her respect and admiration, would be a good deal worse than useless.

He must, then—and there was yet time—resign his fortune, and accept Sophie and a clear conscience, poverty and a country parish. But persons who have wealth absolutely in their power, to take or to leave, see clearly how much poetical extravagance, hypocrisy, and cant, exists in the arguments of those who

advocate the beauties and advantages of being poor. Deliberately and voluntarily to forego the opportunities, the influence, the ease, the refinement, which money alone can command—let not the sacrifice be underrated! Few, perhaps, have had the choice fairly offered them: of those, how many have chosen poverty? In Bressant's case, the fact that the money was not legally his, was, abstractly, enough to settle the matter; but in real life, where every one is expected to do battle for his claims, it would only be an argument for holding on the harder. If he could but manage to be happily married and wealthy both! He would not confess it impossible: at all events, he would delay the confession till the very latest hour, and then trust to the impulse of the moment for his final decision and action. He had given up, it seemed, that promising idea of trusting to the generosity of the rightful owner; yet, considering their mutual relation, and one or two minor circumstances, he might certainly do so without misgiving, embarrassment or dishonour.

‘It's that infernal letter!’ muttered the young man between his teeth, staring gloomily out at the cheerless snow-storm. I wish it had never

been written. No! that I could feel sure there was no truth in it.'

Turning from the window, he stepped over to the table, and dropped himself into his chair. He took from his pocket a well-worn envelope, hardly capable of holding on to the enclosed letter, which peeped forth at the corners, and through various rents in the front and back. He did not open it, for he had long known by heart every word and italic in it; but, placing it in front of him, he leant upon his elbows, with his forehead resting between his hands, and gazed fixedly down upon it. It is an assistance to the vividness of thought to have some object in sight connected with the matter under consideration.

'Ought I to have answered it?' ran his soliloquy: for though he had frequently taken counsel with himself concerning this letter before, he recurred again and again to the subject, pleasing himself with the hope that still, in some way, a fortunate ray of light might be struck out: 'but, if I had, what should I have gained by it? It's as well not to have risked putting anything on paper; and if she really has the proofs she talks about, I

shall hear from her again, and soon, for she knows which is my wedding-day ; and it must all be decided, one way or another, before then. But she couldn't have made the assertion if she hadn't known some good grounds for it ; and yet I can't understand it—I cannot.' He pressed his temples strongly between his hands, and chewed his brown moustache. 'As to my having "no legal claim to a cent," I knew that before. What puzzles me is, "There is no consideration—not a *shadow* of relationship, or affection, or generosity—nothing to give you the least *prospect* of receiving anything." How can that be? And yet what she says at the end : it sounds more like a threat she knows she can fulfil than an attempt to humbug.' Bressant took his right hand from his forehead, and tapped with his finger on the envelope as he repeated the words : 'If this is enough—convinces you without your requiring proof—it would be much pleasanter for you, and a great relief to me. Oh ! beyond *words* ! But if not—if you will *go on* entangling yourself with this foolish girl, Sophie, and this boarding-house keeper, and all—I *shall* be obliged—I shall hate to *do* it, but there will be no alternative—to give you the *explanation* of what I tell you now.'

‘Well! let her!’ cried the young man, rising roughly from his chair, and shouldering backwards and forwards across his room with short, incensed steps. ‘If her proofs can prevent my marriage, let her bring them. She’d better be quick about it! Four days from now! They’d better never have come at all. It’s her interest as much as mine—more than mine. She’s a half-crazy old creature. She can do nothing for herself. If she has anything to say, let her say it. I’m no baby, to shape my life after an old woman’s story. Who is she? What is she to me?’

‘Let something happen, I say,’ continued he, stretching out his great arms, with the fists clenched. ‘I’m tired of this—the life of a dog with his tail between his legs. Is it *I* who go about, afraid to look man or woman in the face? Am I the same who came here six months ago? Did I come here to learn this? Who was it taught it to me, then? I say, I’ve been deceived: it’s no work of mine. Professor Valeyon—he’s made me a subject for experiment: he’s tried his theories on me: dissected me, and filled in the parts that were wanting. It’s a dangerous business, Professor Valeyon.

You've lost one daughter: the other may go too.'

Bressant's voice, which had been growing hoarser and more rapid as he went on, abruptly sank, at this last sentence, into a whisper; yet, had anyone been there to listen, the whisper would have sounded louder and more terrible than the most violent vociferation of angry passion. It breathed a sudden concentration of evil intelligence, that startled like the hiss of a serpent.

He stopped his short, passionate walk, and leant against his table, with his arms once more folded. The idea that he had been tampered with had gained possession of him, and nothing tends more to demoralise a man, and make him unmanageably angry. His was an uncandid position, without doubt: he was attempting to lay upon others the responsibility which—the greater part of it, at least—should have been borne by himself; but still, the vein of reasoning he pursued was connected and comprehensible, and was rendered awkward by an ugly little thread of something like truth and justice, which showed here and there along its course.

‘They’ve taught me to love : did they think they could stop there? that I shouldn’t learn to lie, as well? and to hate, and be revengeful? and to be afraid? Was I so bad when I came here that all this has made me no worse? I was happy, at any rate : my brain was clear : my mind had no fear and no weariness—it was like an athlete : my blood was cool. Look at me, now? Am not I ruined by this patching and mending? I can do no work. When I think, it’s no longer of how I might become great, and wise, and powerful—of nothing inspiring—nothing noble ;—but all about these petty, heated, miserable affairs, that have twisted themselves around me, and are choking me up. I don’t ask myself, any more, whether my name will be as highly honoured and as long remembered as the Christian Apostles’, and Mahomet’s, and Luther’s. My only question is, whether I’m to turn out more of a fool, or of a liar! And *I* love Sophie Valeyon! I’m to be her husband.’

The young man came to a sudden stop, and slowly lifted his head. Through the sullen, unhappy, and resentful cloud that darkened his eyes, there glimmered doubtfully a light such

as can be reflected only from what is most divine in man. It was a strange moment for it to appear, for at no time had Bressant's moral level been so low as now; but, happily, the phenomenon is by no means without precedent in human nature. God is never ashamed to declare the share He holds in a sinner's heart, however black the heart may be.

‘No, no!’ said he, and as he said it, the first tears that he had ever known glistened for a moment in his eyes—‘such as I am, I must never marry her.’

The point on which this sudden and momentous resolve turned was so subtle and delicately evanescent as scarcely to be susceptible of clearer portrayal. To be consistent, the weight of his revengeful sentiments should have been directed upon Sophie, for she it was who had played the most effective part in changing his nature, and swerving him from his cold, but sublime ambitions. By teaching Bressant love, she had, by implication, done him deadly injury, yet was the love itself so pure and genuine as to prompt him to resign its object; he being rendered unworthy of her by that same moral dereliction which she herself had occasioned.

But the very quality which enables us to do a noble deed, dulls our appreciation of our own praiseworthiness. Bressant took no encouragement or pleasure from what he had done ; probably, also, his realization of the extensive and fearful consequences of the action, to others as well as to himself, was as yet but rudimentary ; so soon as the momentary glow was passed, he fell back into a yet darker mood than before, and felt yet more adrift and reckless. To make a sacrifice is well ; but does not hinder the need of what is given up from crippling us.

Again the young man turned to the window, and, raising the sash, he secured it by the little button used for the purpose, and leaned out into the snow-storm. The flakes fell and melted upon his face, and caught in his bushy beard, and rested lightly upon his twisted hair. They flew into his eyes, and made little drifts upon the collar of his coat, and in the folds of his sleeves. He gazed up towards the dull gray cloud from whence they came, and presently out of the confusion, and carelessness, and morbid impatience of his heart, he put forth a prayer that some awfully stirring event might come to pass ; let a sword pass through his

life! let him be smitten down and trampled upon! let his mind be continually occupied with the extreme of active, living suffering! let there be no cessation till the end! he could accept it and exult in it; but to live on as he was living now, was to walk open-eyed **into** insanity. Rather than that, he would commit some capital crime, and subject himself to the penalty. Let God take at least so much pity upon him, and grant him physical agony!

It is not often that our prayers are answered, nor, when they are, does the answer come in the form our expectations shaped. Occasionally, however—and then, perhaps, with a promptness and completeness that force us to a realisation of how extravagant and senseless our desires are—does fulfilment come upon us.

As Bressant's strange petition went up through the storm, a sleigh came along from the direction of the railway station. It was nothing but a cart on runners, and painted a dingy, grayish blue; it was loaded with a dozen tin milk-cans, much defaced by hard usage; each one stopped with an enormous cork. The driver was clad in an overcoat, which once had been dark brown or black, but had worn to a greenish

yellow, except where the collar turned up around the throat, and showed the original colour. His head and most of his face were enveloped in a knit woollen comforter, and mittens of the same make and material protected his hands. His legs were wrapped up in a gray horse-blanket. He was whitened here and there with snow, and snow was packed between the necks of the milk-cans. He drove directly towards the boarding-house, and he and Bressant caught sight of one another at the same moment.

‘Hallo!’ called the stranger; ‘you’re Bressant, I guess, ain’t you? I’ve got something for you.’ Here he drew up beneath the window. ‘You see, I was down to the depôt getting some milk aboard the up-train, and Davis, the telegraph man, came up and asked me, “Bill Reynolds, are you going up to Abbie’s? ’cause,” says he, “here’s a telegraph has come for the student up there,—him that’s going to marry Sophie Val’yon—and our boy, he’s down with the influenza,” says he. “I’m your man!” says I, “let’s have it!” and here ’tis,’” added Mr. Reynolds, producing a yellow envelope from the bottom of his overcoat pocket.

Bressant had heard little or nothing of the

explanation volunteered by the bearer of the message, but he at once recognised the yellow telegraph envelope, and comprehended the rest. But ere he could leave the window to go down and receive it, he saw the fat servant-girl, who had witnessed the scene from the parlour, run down to the front gate, sinking above her ankles at every step, take the envelope from Bill's mittened paw, exchange a word and a grin with him, and then return, carefully stepping into the holes she had made going out. Bill gave a nod of good-will to Bressant's window—for Bressant was no longer there—whipped up his nag, and jingled off with his milk cans. In another minute the fat servant-girl, after stamping the remains of the snow off her shoes upon the door-mat, opened the door, and introduced the despatch, and her own smiling physiognomy. Bressant snatched the former, and shut the door in the latter, before the hand-wiping and haranguing had time to begin.

Before opening the envelope, he stood up at his full height, and filled his lungs with a long, profound breath ; then emitted it suddenly in a sort of deep, short growl, and took his seat at

the table. He tore open the end of the envelope, pulled out the enclosure, which was an ordinary printed telegraph blank, filled in with three lines of writing, as follows :—‘ *Been very ill come on at once at once must hear all no alternative* ’—in the scrawly and unpunctuated chirography peculiar to written telegrams. The name signed was ‘ M. Vauderp.’ Bressant read the message, and afterwards carefully perused the printing, even down to the name of the printer’s firm, which was given in very small type at the bottom of the paper. Then he glanced over the writing once more, and returned the paper to the envelope.

‘ At once, at once ! ’ muttered he ; ‘ that’s the only way of writing italics in telegraphy, I suppose. Well, I’ll go at once ; it’s ten now ; there’s a train at half-past.’

He unlocked a drawer in his table, and took from it a purse, which he put in his pocket. He buttoned a pea-jacket across his broad chest, pressed a round fur cap on to his handsome head, took a pair of thick gloves from the mantel-piece, and walked away without giving one backward glance.

The snow blew and drifted through the open

window into the empty room ; the few remaining flowers were hustled from their stalks ; the red eye of the stove grew dimmer and dimmer, and finally faded into darkness, and the coloured drawing of the patent derrick broke loose at another corner, and flapped and fluttered against the wall in crazy exultation.

CHAPTER IX.

FACT AND FANCY.

THE snow-storm continued all that afternoon. The customary hour for Bressant's visit to the Parsonage went by, and he did not appear. The Professor smoked two extra pipes, and spent half an hour looking out across the valley trying to discern the open spot upon the top of the hill. Finally, the early twilight set in, and he returned to his chair, but felt no impulse to light a lamp and take up a book. He sat tilted back, pulling Shakespeare's nose with meditative fingers. A gloom gradually settled over the room, withdrawing one after another of the familiar objects around him from the old gentleman's sight: it even seemed to creep into his heart, and create a vague uneasiness there. He tried to shake it off, telling himself that he was the happiest and most fortunate old fellow alive:

that everything was coming out just as he had hoped and prayed it might : that one daughter, with the man of her choice, would be just far enough removed from his fireside to give a piquancy to the frequent visits he should receive from her : while the other would still, for a time, continue to pour out sunshine in the house, and redouble her love for him by way of compensating for what he should miss in Sophie's absence. And then the Professor built an airier and a fairer castle still ; beneath it lay the heavy clouds of suffering, barren effort, and hope deferred : its sunlit walls were hewn of solid faith : the banner which floated over the battlements was woven with white threads of truth : over the arched entrance gate was written ' Constancy.' Yet, fair and lofty as the castle was, the building materials were taken from no less homely edifices than the village boarding-house and his own Parsonage !

By-and-bye, however, the vision faded, or else the clouds upon which it was built rose up and hid it. The Professor, returning to himself, found that he was now surrounded with thick darkness, and strive as he would, he could paint no fancies upon it which did not partake more or

less of the character of the background. Sophie seemed to have lost the steady cheer of her aspect, she was pale and fragile, and every moment took away yet more of earthly substance, till scarcely anything but the faint lustre of her face and form remained. Then, all at once, the features which had heretofore been only sad, changed into an expression of horror and torture and despair : and while the Professor, himself aghast, strained his old eyes to make out more clearly the half indistinguishable image, it vanished quite away : but at the last moment it had spoken : at least, the lips had moved as if in speech, though no sound had reached the Professor's ears. Yet he fancied he had caught a glimmering of the purport : he pressed his hands over his forehead to shut out the thought, and wondered no longer at the expression upon Sophie's face.

Then Cornelia moved across the hollow blackness of the room. She was sunshiny no longer, but morose and stern, her eyebrows were drawn together : a secret defiance was in her tigerish eyes : her lips were set, yet seemed ever and anon, as she turned her face aside, to tremble with a passionate yearning. As he gazed, she

disappeared, but the Professor had a feeling that she was still concealed somewhere in the darkness. And at last she came again—she, or something that looked like her : the old gentleman shivered and recoiled, as though a snow-drift had somehow blown into his warm old heart. Was it his daughter who looked with those unmeaning eyes, encircled with dark rings, in which life and passion burnt out had left the dull ashes of remorse and hopelessness? Where were the luminous cheeks and the queenly step of his proud and beautiful Cornelia?—What words were those? or was it only fancy—Ah!—The Professor started with a sharp exclamation:—but he was alone in his dark study, and the phantom of Cornelia was gone.

He composed himself in his chair again, and presently a third figure grew into form and colour before him. At first, as a stately young girl, with the arched feet and hot blood of the south, and her eyes dark and soft as a Spaniard's. But her beauty lasted but for a moment : a withering change came over face and figure : she was cold and hard : her youthful ardour, warmth, and freshness had been shrivelled up, or worn away. The rich black hair grew rusty,

and the dark, delicate complexion became dull and lustreless. Nevertheless, the Professor continued to look with hopeful expectation, confident that a further alteration would ensue, which, though it would not restore the grace of youth, would give a peace and happiness yet more beautiful. And indeed, it seemed for a moment, as though his expectation would be gratified. The figure raised its head and held forth its hands, and the Professor's bright anticipation was reflected in its eyes. But alas! the brightness faded almost before it could be affirmed to exist: the hands dropped to the sides, the head was averted, and the whole form shrank back, and sank to the ground. For the third time—the Professor's imagination was certainly playing him strange tricks this evening—the ghost of spoken words appeared to fall upon his ears, and sink like molten lead into his heart. He groaned, and there was an oppression on his chest, so that he struggled for breath: but in another moment the crouching figure was gone, and the oppression with it: but drops of sweat stood upon the old man's broad forehead.

Still another vision awaits him, however, and

he draws himself up sternly to encounter it, and a heavy frown lowers on his thick grey eyebrows. But the lofty form which confronts him, massive and stalwart alike in mind and body, meets his gaze unflinchingly, and frowns back in angry defiance. The old Professor pauses in his intended denunciation, being taken aback, somewhat, at the unexpected counter-accusation which strikes out at him from the young man's eyes. Yet do his self-confidence and indignation become reconfirmed ; for there, behind, the three former phantoms appear together, and seem to launch against the last a deadly shaft of bitter reproach and judgment. The Professor watches it cleave a passage through the stalwart figure's heart, and he bows his head and thinks—It is but justice ! In the same instant, a cry of intensest pain and horror escapes him : the deadly arrow, additionally poisoned by the blood it has just shed, has passed quite through the spectre of his former pupil, and is buried up to the feather in Professor Valeyon's own vitals ! This shock effectually wakened the old gentleman—for after all he had only been having an uneasy nap in his straight-backed chair !—and he started to his feet, and fumbled nervously

for the match-box. Just then, Sophie appeared at the door with a lamp in her hand—the real Sophie; this time—no intangible shadow.

‘Why, papa dear! What are you doing in here in the dark? Have you been asleep?’

‘Come here, my dear!’ said the Professor, in a shaken voice, holding out his hand. He took her on his knee, and hugged her to him eagerly, passing his hand down her arm, and pressing her slender fingers. ‘Are you well and happy, Sophie?’

‘Yes, papa,’ she answered, laying her head as usual on his shoulder.

‘He—your—young man did’nt come to-day?’ continued the Professor, with an attempt to be jocose. ‘He’s getting very squeamish to be kept back by a snow-storm!’

Sophie replied only by nestling closer to her father’s shoulder.

‘Where’s Neelie?’ enquired the Professor, again breaking the silence.

‘She’s seeing about supper, I believe.’

‘Have you heard anything about Abbie lately?’ proceeded the other. He must have been either strangely anxious to keep up a conversation, or unusually inquisitive, this evening.

‘Not very lately ; I saw her about a week ago. She didn’t look in very good spirits, it seemed to me.’

‘Not in good spirits, eh ? not in good spirits ? and that was a week ago ! was she ill ?’

‘I don’t think there was anything the matter—with her health, I mean ; she only looked very sad—as if something had almost broken her heart. But then she always is grave, you know.’

‘She has been, of late years, that’s certain,’ muttered the old man gruffly ; ‘and does she begin to be broken-hearted *now* !’ he added to himself. More thoughts, and angry ones, he might have had, but the memory of his untoward dream still hovered about him, and he suppressed them.

‘What are you thinking of, papa ?’ demanded Sophie, with an inquietude of manner which attracted the Professor’s attention. He laid his finger on her pulse, and touched her forehead.

‘You’ve taken cold, my dear,’ he said, with the most tender anxiety of tone. ‘What have you been doing ? How have you exposed your self ?’

‘I was out on the porch, about an hour ago,’

replied she, languidly. 'I wanted to—to see if he was coming, you know. The snow came on me a little, I believe, and I had on my slippers. But I didn't feel anything—any cold. I was out only a moment.'

Professor Valeyon turned his strong-featured face away from the lamp, so that the shadow covered his expression. He could feel the heat of Sophie's cheek through his coat, as she lay heavily on his shoulder; heavily, but not half so heavily there as upon his heart. But, with the physician's instinct, his voice was on that account all the more cheerful.

'Well, well, my little girl; it won't do to run any risks now-a-days, remember! I shall make you drink a big cup of hot water, with a little tea and sugar in it, and go to bed early, with three or four extra blankets. Meanwhile, come! let's go and see whether Cornelia has got supper ready yet.' So saying, the old gentleman gained his feet, offering his arm with a bow, took up the lamp with his other hand, and off they went, leaving Shakespeare's plaster bust placidly to face the darkness alone, as he had often done before.

The next morning the storm was over, and

the sun came dazzling over the spotless fields, but Sophie kept her bed, with bright, restless eyes, and hot cheeks. The Professor dreaded a return of the typhoid pneumonia, and paced his study incessantly, in a voiceless fever of anxiety ; physically exhausting himself the better to affect quiet and unconcern when in her room. He mentioned his fears to no one—not even to Cornelia ; besides, if care were taken, she might recover yet, without fatal, or even serious danger. To herself, therefore, and to all who enquired, he spoke of her attack as merely a cold, which must be nursed for prudence sake. Meanwhile, no signs of Bressant. Sophie said not a word, but Cornelia showed uneasiness, and kept making suggestive remarks to her father, and hazarding unsatisfactory explanations of his absence. She never ventured to say anything to her sister on the subject, however. There was a gulf between the two that widened, like a river, hour by hour.

Towards evening a letter came from the boarding-house, directed to Professor Valeyon. It was in Abbie's handwriting, and must contain some news of Bressant. The old gentleman shut himself up in his room, the better to

deal with the intelligence, and the paper rustled nervously in his fingers as he read ; but the news amounted to little after all.

‘For fear dear Sophie and you should feel anxious about Mr. Bressant, I will tell you all I know of his absence,’ said the letter. ‘A telegram came for him yesterday morning about ten. Joanna, the servant, who took it up to him, says Mr. Reynolds told her it was from New York. So I suppose some friend there—you will probably be able to say who—has been taken very dangerously ill, or perhaps is dead. The summons must have been very urgent, for he left his room not ten minutes afterwards, and took the half-past ten o’clock train down:

‘I feel sure he will be back by to-morrow evening. Don’t let your daughters fail to be here to meet him.’

After reading this, and without pausing to indulge in casuistry, Professor Valeyon betook himself straight to Sophie’s chamber.

‘You’ve heard something!’ said she, in a low, assured tone the moment he entered. ‘A letter? give it me—I would rather read it myself.’

The Professor gave it into her hand, with a

smile ; but Sophie's eyes were too deep and dark for any smile to glimmer through. As she opened it he turned his back upon her, and saw out of the window the sinking sun redden the snow-covered hill-top above the road.

‘Yes, I’m sure he will be back to-morrow,’ said Sophie’s quiet voice after a minute or two. She made no comment on his having allowed anything to take him away at such a time—on the eve of his marriage—without first sending word to her ; but gave Abbie’s letter back into her father’s keeping, and lay with closed eyes. He sat down in the chair by the bedside, and presently noticed that she lay more peacefully, and breathed inaudibly and easily, and that the feverish flush was leaving her cheeks. A slight moisture, too, made itself perceptible on her forehead.

‘Her life is in this fellow’s hand !’ thought the Professor, and he trembled to his very heart, but dared not ask himself wherefore.

‘Do you think it would hurt me to sew, papa ?’ said she at length, looking up from her pillow.

‘Better let sewing and everything else alone

for the present, my dear ; it'll be enough work to get all well again by next Sunday.'

Sophie sighed. 'I did so want to finish my wedding-dress all myself,' said she. 'It needs only a few hours' work now, and Cornelia is so busy on her own account, it's hard to ask her. Oh, yes ! dear papa, I know how glad she'd be to help me,' she added quickly, seeing the old gentleman's eyebrows meet and his forehead redden.

'I should hope she would ! Must be very busy if she hasn't time to do so much as that !' growled he. 'I'll send her up to you, my dear.'

'Papa !' said Sophie, calling him back from the door ; and it was not until she had possession of his hand and was holding it against her cheek that she went on. 'Don't let the wedding be put off, if I shouldn't be able to sit up on Sunday. I'll be carried down into the guest-chamber, where he was ill for so long. Don't —papa, I know you won't think hardly of me ; but I feel a kind of superstition about that particular day and hour : that if all is not done then, it never will be. Am not I foolish ? But do let it be so, and never mind wisdom !'

There was a vein of strenuous earnestness only partly concealed beneath her words and manner, which the gruff old gentleman, who was as sensitive as a photographic plate where his affections were concerned, did not fail to note. He kissed her on both cheeks—a fully sufficient answer to her request, and shuffled out of the room in his old slippers; which, thanks to Sophie's filial attentions, still held together with dying faithfulness.

The rest of the day the two sisters passed together—Cornelia working upon her sister's wedding-dress, and Sophie guiding her by directions and suggestions. Not since they first began to grow apart, had there been between them so great an appearance of sisterly love and cordiality. Yet, if Cornelia allowed herself to think at all, it must have seemed, in the light of her purpose regarding Bressant, as if she was preparing a shroud rather than a wedding-garment. Or, perhaps, as she observed the change which even so brief and light an illness had made in Sophie's delicate face, there may have lurked in the secret places of her mind, a darker and guiltier thought than that. But let not our condemnation be too unconditional,

lest the precedent come home, some day, to ourselves. It may astonish us, hereafter, to discover how many of our most respectable acquaintances are murderers—only in thought!

But Sophie's condition seemed steadily to improve, and by the morning of the thirtieth, the Professor apprehended no danger but from imprudence. That she should attend Abbie's party was, of course, out of the question; but there was no longer any obstacle in the way of Cornelia's availing herself of the entertainment, if she were so inclined.

Deadly and immitigable as woman's purpose is often represented to be, it may, especially before she becomes thoroughly hardened to crime, be swayed by shades of feeling or sentiment which would appear, to a man, ridiculously trifling, and which, indeed, she could not herself explain or calculate upon: and there is the more likelihood of this, in proportion as the depth to which her emotions and affections are involved in the affair. As to Cornelia, there are no means of determining whether she ever wavered in her designs against her sister's happiness and her friend's constancy, or not;

she at any rate decided to go to the ball, and even condescended to accept Mr. Reynolds' tender of his escort thither. There are a host of respectable motives always on hand for such occasions, and Cornelia might be going either from a curiosity to find out whether Bressant would return, and in order, if so, to bring her sister the latest news; or to obtain relief from the monotony of home-life; or to oblige Abbie, who counted upon her appearance; or to display her ball-dress cut after the latest New York pattern; or all these small matters may have been the wheels whereon rolled the invisible car, but for which they would not have existed.

As she was attiring herself, Sophie, who was seated in her deep invalid-chair, looking at her, was seized by an uncontrollable longing to put on her wedding-dress, and satisfy her mind as to its being a good fit. There it lay, upon the sofa, and nothing could be easier than just to slip into it. Cornelia, absorbed in her own crowded thoughts, never dreamt of opposing the idea, and lent all necessary assistance to carry it out. It was not until Mr. Reynolds had sent up word that the sleigh waited at the

door, and gathering up her cloak and tippet, she had kissed Sophie, left her, and was hurrying down stairs with rustling skirts, that she realised that she had given her parting salute to one dressed as a bride !

CHAPTER X.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

THERE could not have been a better night for sleighing. The temperature had risen considerably since the storm, and the snow, which had fallen to the depth of a foot, was already packed down hard upon the road, so that the runners seldom sank beneath the surface. Moreover, there was a full moon, just pushing its deep orange circumference above the horizon. It had chanced to come up just where a black skeleton forest stood out against the sky, encouraging the fancy that it had somehow got entangled in the branches, and had grown red in the face from struggling to get out. But ere the young people reached the scene of the entertainment the struggle was over: the perfect circle was calmly and radiantly uplifting itself above the world, far beyond the reach of the outstretched arms of the gnarled and black-

limbed forest ; yet did the dark earth benefit by its defeat, in the chaste illumination which descended upon its wintry countenance.

Mr. Reynolds was perfectly happy : it is pleasant to reflect how small an amount of bliss can overflow some souls. Cornelia was brief but kind in her answers to his turbid and confused pourings forth : not that she paid heed to anything the poor fellow said—she was only occasionally aware of his presence. Her mind was revelling in dreams of heated and exalted imagination : she was filled with inspiration, as with the rich, palpitating blast of a mighty organ ; but the tumultuous chorus of her thoughts produced upon her an effect of magnetism which found its expression in a gentle graciousness of words and manner.

She had made up her mind that the first person she should meet would be Bressant ; and, so full did she feel of victorious power, it seemed as if, with scarcely a conscious effort, she could overbear and bring him to her feet. Yes, and dictate the terms upon which she would consent to receive his homage. What a pity that the keynotes of so few natures correspond, at the critical moment, with our own ;

and that Providence sees fit to forward, by even negative help, so small a proportion of our superbly conceived plans.

It was half-past eight when they drew up at the boarding-house door. No sooner had Cornelia set foot within the threshold, and caught sight of Abbie's face, than it was borne in upon her that Bressant was not there; and the former, after questioning her about Sophie's non-appearance, confirmed her fear. He had not come, nor was it now probable that he would arrive before morning. It would have been useless to expect him by the late train, due at half-past ten, since to avail himself of that it would be necessary to make a difficult connection by walking two or three miles from one railway to another.

After climbing to such a height it was terrible to fall. Cornelia had not allowed herself to anticipate the disaster precisely because it was so crushing. In a moment the great, rainbow-tinted bubble of her hope and imagination had burst, leaving only a bitter and unpleasant sense of the paltry and unclean materials—the soap-suds and clay-pipe—wherewith it had been created.

Furthermore, the polite fictions which she had lubricated her conscience withal, regarding her desires and intentions, were shown up at precisely their true value, and a very discreditable spectacle they made. Nothing is more exasperating after a failure than to be stared out of countenance by the unworthy means we have employed. During her progress up stairs to the dressing-room, and brief stay there, Cornelia had ample leisure to review her thoughts and deeds during the latter months of her life. What a waste of time, opportunity, and emotion! It was a tragedy of ridicule and a farce of profound pathos.

Her perception of these things was assisted by the depression which reacted upon her previous excitement: it had an embarrassing way of presenting, in the clearest colours, whatever in her conduct had been most unwise and indefensible. She could have borne it easily had there been as much as one stirring struggle for victory, even had the struggle resulted in defeat. Her state of mind might have borne analogy to his who, having deeply caroused overnight in celebration of some glorious triumph, learned, upon coming to his racked and tortured senses

the next day, that it was a triumph for the other side.

Had the sense of despair been less overwhelming, had Cornelia been merely disappointed, rage would have taken the place of depression, and her thoughts would have run in far different channels. But there was no hope: this was her last chance of all: hereafter a rampart would be erected against her, which she neither was able nor dared to scale. There was no element in her position that could make it endurable, and yet there was no escape. She had not enough spirit of enterprise left to return home at once, but yielded herself with torpid insensibility to whoever chose to make a suggestion. She wonderingly speculated as to how she had ever been able to originate an idea herself.

The evening dragged its slow length along, and dragged Cornelia with it. To be where she was, was insupportable; but to go back to the Parsonage was worse still; and the thought of the solitary drive thither with the overflowing Mr. Reynolds filled her with a nauseating pain of anticipation.

It could not have been far from midnight

when she awoke to a sense of being alone and not far from the side-door into the yard. Her partner—whoever he was—had gone to get her some ice-cream or a cup of coffee. Cornelia did not wait for his return, but walked quickly and unobserved to the door, which stood a few inches ajar, opened it, passed through, and stood in the unconfined air. The keen intensity of the tonic made her nostrils ache, and her uncovered bosom heave. She unbuttoned one of her gloves, and taking some snow in her hand, pressed it to her warm temples, and then let it drop shivering into her breast.

‘It must feel like that to die, I suppose,’ thought she. ‘If I were Sophie, now, that snow would be the death of me in two days: as it is, I shall only have a cold in the head to-morrow. There seems to be no reason in these things.’

A dark figure turned the further corner of the house, and came ploughing through the snow immediately under the eaves, dragging one hand along the clap-boards as it came. The crunching of the snow caught Cornelia’s ears, and she turned and recognised the figure in half a breath. The great height, the massive

breadth, the easy, springing tread—it was Bressant from head to foot. He was buttoned up in a short pea-jacket, and there was a round fur cap on his head. As Cornelia turned upon him he stopped a moment, standing quite motionless, with the fingers of one hand resting on the side of the house. Then he came close up to her and grasped her wrist with his gloved hand.

‘Where is Sophie?’ demanded he in his rapid, muffled voice.

‘She’s ill : she caught cold : she’s at home,’ answered Cornelia, who, at the first recognition, had felt a kind of twang through all her nerves, and was now trying to control the effects of the shock. There was something queer in Bressant’s manner—in the way he looked at her.

‘But you came,’ rejoined he, stooping down and peering into her beautiful, troubled face. He broke into a laugh, which terrified Cornelia greatly, because he laughed so seldom. ‘One might know you’d come. You thought I’d be here : you came to see me, and here I am. Will Sophie get well?’

‘Oh, yes! she was much better. When I left she had on her—wedding dress.’

Bressant drew in his breath hissingly between his teeth, and his fingers tightened a moment round Cornelia’s wrist. The pain forced a sob from her and turned her lips pale. He paid no attention to her, presently dropped her wrist, and put his hands behind him, grinding the snow beneath his heel, and looking down.

‘Whom is she going to marry?’ was his next question, asked without raising his head.

‘You!’ exclaimed Cornelia, in astonishment and fear. The answer sprang to her lips without forethought or reflection, so much had the strange question startled her.

But he again stooped down and peered into her eyes, watching the effect of his words on her as he spoke them.

‘No, no! I am not he who promised to marry her. She wouldn’t have me, if I asked her: she don’t know me. I’m going to marry some one else. *She’ll* love me, no matter who I am. Shall I tell you her name?’

Cornelia could only shiver—shiver—with dry mouth and dilated eyes. Bressant put his hand on her shoulder, and drew her forward a

step or two, so that the white moonlight fell upon her.

‘Cornelia Valeyon is her name,’ said he; and then, as she remained rigid, he bent forward with a whispered laugh, and kissed her on the face.

‘There! now we belong to each other: a good match aren’t we?—Quick! now; run into the house and get your things on. You must walk home with me, and we’ll arrange everything. Go! I shall wait for you here.’

She re-entered the house, cold and dizzy, just as her partner arrived with the coffee. She explained—what scarcely needed to be told—that she felt faint; she must go up-stairs. In three minutes she had put her satin-slippered feet into a pair of waterproof overshoes, pinned up her trailing skirts, thrown on her long wadded mantle, with sleeves and hood, and had got down stairs again before ‘assistance’ could arrive. All the time there was a burning and tingling where his lips had been, but she would not put up her hand to touch the spot and relieve the sensation. It was in a manner sacred to her; albeit the sanctity was largely mingled with bewilderment, remorse, and fear.

When she came out Bressant was standing where she had left him, tossing a couple of snow-balls from one hand to another. He dropped them as she approached and brushed the snow from his gloves. She took the arm he offered her—timidly and yet feeling that it was all in the world she had to cling to. It was true—by that kiss she belonged to him, for it had made her a traitor to all else on whom she had hitherto had a claim. Yet upon how different a footing did they stand with one another from that which she had prefigured to herself! This was he whom she was to have brought, vanquished, to her feet! With one motion of his strong, masculine hand he had swept away all her fine-spun cobwebs of opportunity and method, and had laid his clutch upon the very marrow of her soul. But though she had lost the command, she was party, if not principal, to the guilt. It was he who had taken fire from her.

‘You remember last summer,’ said he, ‘that night when an arch was in the sky? We didn’t understand one another then, and I didn’t understand myself. But during the last day or two I’ve been thinking it all over.

I've had too good an opinion of myself all along.'

'What is it that you've been thinking?' asked Cornelia, feeling repelled, and yet driven by a piteous necessity to know all the contents, good or bad, of this heart which was her only possession.

'Of all that's been said and done this last half year. There's nothing you care for more than me, is there?' he demanded, concentrating the greatest emphasis into the question.

'If you care for me—if I can be everything to you'—Cornelia's voice was broken and tossed upon the uncontrolled waves of fighting emotions, and she could give little care to the form and manner of her speech.

'I love you—of course I love you!—what else is there for me to do? But I've been all this time trying to find out what love was. I thought I loved Sophie, you know.'

Bressant's strange words and altered manner dismayed Cornelia. What was the matter with him? She could not get it out of her head that some awful event must have happened; but she knew not how to frame enquiries. Bressant continued, a determined levity in his

tone was yet occasionally broken down by a stroke of feeling terribly real.

‘I was a great fool—you should have told me; you knew more about it than I did. It was my self conceit—I thought nothing was too good for me. When I saw you I thought you were the flower of the world, so I wanted you. Well—you are—the flower of the world!’

‘He does love me!’ said Cornelia to herself; and she knew a momentary pang of bliss which no consideration of honour or rectitude had power to dull or diminish.

‘But afterwards,’ he went on, his voice lowering for an instant, ‘I saw an angel—something above all the flowers of this world—and I was fool enough to imagine she would suit me better still. You never thought so, did you Cornelia?’ he added, with a half laugh, ‘well—you should have told me!’

How he dragged her up and down and struck her where she was most defenceless! Did he do it on purpose, or unconsciously?’

‘I mistook worship for love—that was the trouble, I fancy. Luckily, I found out in time—it won’t do to love what is highest: it can only make one mad. Love what you can

understand—that's the way! See how wise I've become.'

Bressant's laugh affected Cornelia like a deadly drug. Her speech was fettered, and she moved without her own will or guidance.

"I found out—just in time—that I needed more body and less soul: less goodness, and—more Cornelia!" he concluded, epigrammatically.

So this was her position. It could hardly be more humiliating. Yet how could she rebel? for was not the yoke of her own manufacture? Indeed, had she been put to it she might have found it a difficult matter to distinguish between the actual relation now subsisting between Bressant and herself, and that which she had been for months past striving to effect. He had met her half way, that was all.

But surely it was only during this absence that this idea of abandoning Sophie, and turning to herself, had occurred to him. Half as a question, half as an exclamation, the words found their way through Cornelia's twitching lips,

'What has happened to you since you went away?'

‘Oh! since we love each other, there’s no use talking about that at present. If I had any idea of marrying Sophie, now, I should have to go and tell her everything. It’s so convenient to be certain that *nothing* can change your love for me, Cornelia! No, no! I wouldn’t be so suspicious of you as to tell you now.’

‘When am I to know then?’ she asked, fearful of she knew not what.

‘After we’re married there shall be a clearing up of it all. You’ll be much amused! By the way, I found out one queer thing—what my real name is!’

‘Your real name!’

‘Yes—who I am; you know I said I wasn’t the same who was engaged to marry Sophie. Well, I’m not; he was a myth—there was no such person. I always thought “Bressant” was an incognito, didn’t you? But it turns out to be the only name I have! I hope you like it; do you think “Mrs. Bressant” sounds well?’

‘What does all this mean? What are you going to do with me? Are you making a sport of me,’ cried Cornelia, clasping both hands over Bressant’s arm, in a passion of helplessness. Much as she loved life, she would at that

moment have died rather than feel that she was ridiculed and deserted by him.

They had come to the brow of the hill on which the village stood, overlooking the valley, which moon and snow together lit up into a sort of phantom daylight. The moon hung aloft, directly above their heads; and the narrow circumference of their shadows, lying close at their feet, were mingled indistinguishably together. Cornelia, in the energy of her appeal, had stopped walking, and the two stood for a moment looking at one another. Seen from a few yards' distance, they would have made a supremely beautiful and romantic picture. The stately poise of Bressant's gigantic figure—the slight inclination of his head and shoulders towards Cornelia—presented an ideal model for a tender and protecting lover. She, in form and bearing, the incarnation of earthly grace and symmetry, her lovely upturned face revealed in deep soft shadows, and sweet, melting lights, her rounded fingers interlaced across his arm, her bosom lifting and letting fall irregularly the cloak that lay across it; what completer embodiment could there be of happy self-surrendering, trusting young-womanhood? And what

were the fitly-spoken words—the apples of gold in this picture of silver ?

‘Cornelia,’ said Bressant, throwing aside the levity as well as the underlying passion of his tone, and speaking with a slightly impatient coldness, ‘Don’t you begin to be a fool as soon as I leave it off. You may call what joins us together love, if you like, but it’s not worth getting excited about. You take me because you were jealous of Sophie, and because you’ve compromised yourself. I take you because you’re beautiful to look at and—because nobody else would have me ! We shall have plenty of money, which will help us along. But what is there in our relations to make us either enthusiastic or miserable ?—Come along !’

This was the consummation of Cornelia’s passionate hopes and torturing fears ; of her dishonorable intriguing and reckless self-dedecration. She became very calm all of a sudden, and without making any rejoinder, she ‘came along’ as he bade her, and they descended the hill.

CHAPTER XI.

FOUND.

SOPHIE, having carried her point regarding her wedding-dress, had nothing better to do after Cornelia had left her than to give herself up to reverie. She had a private purpose to sit up until her sister's return, that she might hear all about Bressant, and why he had stayed away so long and sent no word. That he had returned, expecting to meet her at the ball, she entertained not the slightest doubt; nor was there at this time any suspicion or misgiving in her mind about his fidelity and love.

Mankind's ignorance of the future is, beyond dispute, a blessing; yet we could wish, for Sophie, that so much presentiment of what was to come might be hers as to lead her to concentrate all possible happy thoughts into the few hours that remained wherein she might yet be

happy. She had full scope and freedom to think what she would—no less than if a hundred years of earthly bliss had awaited her. Her life had been full of all manner of spiritual beauties and perfumes—a divine poem, though written upon clay. Let only the harmony of sweet music float about her now, and the shadow of what was to come be not cast over her.

She sat in her deep, soft, easy chair, with its high back, and square, roomy seat. An open-grate stove furnished light to the room, for Sophie had blown out her candle. As the flame rose or sank, the various objects round about stood visible, or vanished duskily away. Endymion, over the mantelpiece, still slept as peacefully as ever, and the smile, though for ever upon his lips, seemed always to have but that moment alighted there. How tenderly the lustrous touch of the moon brightened on his white shoulder !

The golden letters of the Lord's Prayer gleamed ever and anon from the shadow above the bed, and sent the shining beauty of a sentence across to Sophie's eyes ; and the face of the cherub, with his chin upon his hand, was turned upward in immortal adoration. Sophie's

glance rested thoughtfully upon one and then the other. They were incorporated into her life. Would they have power to protect her from evil and suffering? Well, the words of the Prayer settle that question most wisely.

How silent the house was and how light it was outdoors. Sophie rose from her chair by the fire and walked slowly to the window. A board creaked beneath her quiet foot and a red coal fell with a gentle thud into the ash-receiver. Then, as Sophie leaned against the window, she heard the little ormolu clock, in the room below, faintly tinkle out the half-hour after eleven. Before long—in an hour perhaps—Cornelia would be back, rosy with the cold, fresh, laughing, and full of news. Dear Neelie! How Sophie wished that she might find a love as deep and a happiness as perfect as had come to her. It hardly seemed fair that she should monopolise so much of the world's joy. True, God knows best; but Sophie, with her forehead against the cold window-pane, prayed that Cornelia might speedily become as blessed as herself. Then she turned to go back to her chair, casting a parting glance at the white road, with the glistening track of

sleigh-runners visible as far as the bend. No moving thing was in sight. In stepping from the window her foot caught in the skirt of her wedding-dress, and she narrowly escaped falling. The loose board creaked again, dismally; but Sophie laughed at her clumsiness, and recovering her balance, reached her chair and sat down in it. How warm and pleasant it was. The walls of the room seemed to draw up cosily around the stove, and nod to one another good-naturedly. They loved Sophie and would do all they could to make her comfortable and secure. She sat quite still, and perhaps fell into a light, half-waking slumber.

A while afterwards, she suddenly started in her chair, her head raised, as if listening. The fire burnt as warmly as ever, but Sophie was trembling uncontrollably, and her heart was beating most unmercifully. She walked quickly and blindly, with outstretched hands, to the window. This time the ominous board forbore to creak. Its omen was fulfilled.

Without hesitating, she threw up the window, and, unmindful of the tingling inrush of cold air, she leaned out, and looked down through the arched window of the porch. The bare

vines that struggled across it afforded no interception to the view of the two figures standing within. Sophie gazed at them as a bird does at a snake : she could not take her eyes away : she could not move nor utter a sound. It was like the oppression and paralysis of a fearful dream. Was she dreaming ?

It was a terribly vivid dream, at any rate. She seemed to see one of the figures—a woman—clasp the man's hand passionately in hers and speak. The voice was known to her ; it was as familiar as her own ; but the words it uttered made her sure she was asleep. Thank God ! it wasn't real. She would wake up in a moment, and shudder to think how ugly a dream it had been. Oh ! if she could only awaken before this conversation went any further. It was breaking her heart : it was killing her. She had heard of people who died in their sleep—was it from such dreams as this ?

She seemed to have heard two voices—voices that she loved and knew as well as her own heart—talking a horrible, unholy jargon about some purpose—some plan—something that it was a sin even to listen to or imagine ; but, as

in a dream, she had no choice but to listen. She tried to shake off the delusion—to see, to prove that what she saw and heard was false. But still it lasted, and lasted. Still those wicked sentences kept creeping into her ears and deadening her heart. Oh, God! would it never cease?—would there never be an end?

At length the end seemed about to come. But, ah! the end was worst of all. Shame—shame to her that such sinful imaginings should visit her brain. She saw the figure of the man turn away as if to go; but the woman caught him by the arm, and lifted her beautiful, guilty face up towards his as if beseeching him for a parting kiss. She saw him stoop his dark, bearded head, with a half-impatient gesture, and kiss the beautiful woman's mouth, then motion her towards the house. 'Make haste and put on your travelling dress,' he seemed to say: 'I'll walk up the road a little way and wait for you.'

Sophie found power to slip down from the window after that, but she knew she was dreaming still. She heard a stealthy footstep on the stairs and along the entry; it seemed to pause, and hesitate a moment at her door; but

then it went on and entered Cornelia's room. If she only could go to her lover, Sophie thought. If she only could speak to him and feel his arms around her. And why should she not? he had but just gone up the road. She would slip out and run after him. It was deadly cold: she was in her white wedding-dress. Yes; but then it was a dream—nothing but a dream—no harm could come of it.

She lifted herself softly from the floor, and moved towards the door. She passed the looking-glass on the dressing-table as she went, and cast a darkling glance into it. A haggard ghost seemed to stare back at her, with crazy eyes. A braid of brown, silky hair, had become loosened, and was creeping down upon the spectre's shoulders.

Sophie stole along as noiselessly as a cat. She descended the staircase, glided down the passage, opened the outer door, and was on the frozen porch. The chill of the air passed through her as if she had been indeed but a spirit. The dream must surely be a dream of death. She ran down the icy path to the gate, and, looking along the road, saw that a tall figure had nearly reached the spur of the hill,

around which the road turned. By hurrying she would yet be able to overtake him. She passed through the gate without causing a creak or a rattle, gathered up her light skirt, and started to run as speedily as she might.

The cold snow penetrated through her thin slippers and made her feet ache and sting. The breeze forced a cruel entrance through the bosom of her dress, as if to freeze the heart that was beating so. As she ran on she began to pant so heavily it seemed as if every breath must be her last. The familiar road, the well-known outline of the hills, the stone walls, the stretch of woods to the left, where she had walked so often last fall, all looked now ghastly and unreal—a world whose only sun was the moon—a fitting world for such a dream as this.

Still she staggered onwards, slipping in the polished ruts of the sleigh-runners, plunging into the deep snow. Her body was cold as the winter itself, but her head was burning as if a fire were within it. She reached the bend and her eyes strained wildly up the road. There! far ahead, marked black against the ghastly snow—there! still moving away—further away. Would she ever reach him?

It was hopeless, and yet she kept on. Rather than let him go without having assured her it was all a wicked dream—without having hugged her in his arms, and given her her good-night kiss—without having called her his own, only Sophie, and promised he would always love her, and no other—rather than give up all this, she would die in the pursuit, and it were well that she should die. So on she ran : her brain reeled, she could scarcely feel whether her limbs yet moved : there was a griping in her heart, and her breath came in short gasps of agony. The earth darkened and tipped before her eyes, but her resolve never faltered. To reach him, or die. Oh ! how gladly she would die, if only she might reach him. Was not that he—there—only a short way on ? Might not her voice reach him ? Would not some good angel bear it to him ? Even then she stumbled, and fell forward on her knees ; but, ere she sank quite down, she threw forth a wild, piercing, despairing cry, giving to it her whole desolate soul—

‘ Bressant ! Bressant ! ’

Then blackness obliterated everything. But Bressant, as he walked heavily along, encom-

passed with bitter and miserable thoughts, suddenly halted, as if an iron hand had been laid upon his shoulder. Either he had actually heard a faint echo of that unearthly cry, or his spiritual ear had taken cognisance of the call of Sophie's soul. He turned himself about, with a quaking heart. There was the long white road, but no human being was visible upon it. Yet he knew that Sophie's voice had called him. She must be near. Slowly he began to walk back, half dreading to behold her image rise before him, with deep, reproachful eyes.

He had not gone twenty yards, when he started back, having almost set his foot upon something which lay face downwards in the snow, clad in a dress almost as white. He would not have seen her but for her brown hair, which, falling loosely about, was caught and stirred by the inquisitive breeze. She herself lay quite still.

Bressant took her beneath the arms, and lifted her up. Crouching down, he supported her head against his shoulder, and brushed away the snow that had adhered to her face. There was a cut upon her chin, but the blood, after running a few moments, had congealed. Her

eyes were not quite shut, but the lids were stiff and immovable. The mouth, too, was a little open. Was it the moonlight that gave her that death-like look? or was she dead indeed?

The young man broke out into a long, wavering cry. It was not weeping; it was not laughter; yet it bore a resemblance to both. It curdled his own blood, but he could not repress it. It was the voice of over-strained, unendurable emotion, and a horrible voice it was to hear. He feared he was losing his senses—looking in that white, motionless face, and uttering such a cry! At last, however, it died away, and there was silence. The silence was almost worse than the cry—the utter silence of a winter night.

‘What shall I do?’ he said to himself, helplessly.

The unearthly voice, and the discovery to which it had led, following the other events of the night, had made Bressant unfit to deal with this matter after his usual ready and practical style. But he would have found the problem an awkward one at his best. How could he appear at the Parsonage? What account could he give there of this lifeless body? What ac-

count could he give of it to himself? He was utterly bewildered and aghast. It seemed that the dead had risen from the grave, to drag him relentlessly back to the fullest glare of earthly ignominy—to the keenest experience of human suffering. And yet, did he quite deserve it? Was there no grain of leaven in his lump of sinfulness and weakness, if all were known? He is a hardened criminal, indeed, who can find no hope in the thought of appealing from human judgment to Divine!

Meanwhile Mr. Reynolds had been luxuriating in a very unmistakeable sense of injury. To some persons there is a positive relief and gratification in being really wronged: it raises their estimate of their own importance; by virtue of their title to feel angry, disappointed, or deceived, they can take their place in a higher than their ordinary rank. So Mr. Reynolds, finding himself qualified to plead a clear case of absolute and unwarrantable desertion, held up his head, and bore himself with becoming dignity.

His dignity did not, however, interfere with his seeking to drown his slight in the good, old-fashioned way. He solaced himself beyond measure with the varied products of the hotel

bar, and then settled himself solitary in his sleigh and jingled homewards. His road took him past the Parsonage, and he enlivened the lonely way by scraps of songs, reflections upon the perfidy of woman, and portentous yawns at intervals of two or three minutes. In fact, by the time he had gone a mile the most predominant sensation he had was sleepiness, and half a mile more came very near making a second Endymion of him. From this, however, he was preserved by the very sudden stoppage of his sleigh, which threw him on his knees against the dasher, and forcibly knocked his eyes open. He rolled over to the ground, but, happening to light on his feet, he stood unsteadily erect, and asked a very tall and powerful man, who was holding his horse's head, when he was going to let that drop?

Receiving no intelligible answer, he stumbled in the powerful man's direction, perhaps contemplating the performance of some deed of desperate valour. Meanwhile the object of his hostility had relinquished his hold of the horse, and appeared kneeling on the ground, supporting the form of a woman, dressed in a tasteful white dress, with dark, disordered hair lying around her colourless face.

CHAPTER XII.

LOST.

MR. REYNOLDS immediately paused, and regarded this group for some moments with an air of singular sagacity and archness.

‘I say, young fellow,’ ejaculated he, at length, with an evident effort to attain distinctness of utterance, ‘that sort of thing won’t do, you know.’

Bressant looked up and recognised the rustic bacchanalian for the first time. He had always had a peculiar antipathy to this young gentleman ; but at this moment it was intensified into a loathing. How could he ask assistance from such a degraded creature as this ?

The recognition had been mutual, and Mr. Reynolds, tacking unsteadily around, brought himself to bear in such a position as to catch a fair view of Sophie’s face, with the spot of blood on her chin. The first glance so terrified

him, that he utterly forsook his footing, and came abruptly to the ground, never once taking his eyes from the face, all the way. But the shock of his fall, and the awful solemnity of what he saw, sobered him considerably. He turned to Bressant, and eyed him with anxious earnestness.

‘Why, you’re the fellow she’s engaged to, ain’t you? What on earth’s been the row? She ain’t dead, is she? How did she get here? In her wedding-rig, too, by golly!’

Bressant’s frame vibrated with a savage impulse; but Mr. Reynolds, not being of a sensitive temperament, was not at all disconcerted.

‘Well, say, I guess she’d better be fetched home, first thing,’ said he, bestirring himself to arise from the chilly seat he had taken. ‘Lucky I happened along, too. Guess you was hoping I might, wasn’t you? Well, you hoist her under the arms, and I’ll hang on by the feet—ain’t that it? and we’ll have her into the sleigh in no time.’

‘Don’t touch her!’ said the other, fiercely. ‘Let her alone, you drunken fool!’

‘Now, look here, Mr. Bressant,’ rejoined

Bill Reynolds, resting his hands on his knees, and looking intently in Bressant's face, 'I may not be rich and a swell, like you are ; but I guess I'm an honest man, any way, as much as ever you be ; and I ain't insulting nobody by helping take home a poor frozen girl. I don't care if she is engaged to you. You don't mean to keep her here till morning do you ? and seeing she ain't married yet, I guess the right place for her to be in, is her father's house.'

Perhaps it was the moonlight, glinting on Bill's immovable eye-glasses, that gave extraordinary impressiveness to his words ; or it may have been Bressant's reflection, that this young country bumpkin, sullied with drink, coarse, and ignorant though he was, would have probably found his sense of equality in no way diminished, had he known more of the facts to which the present catastrophe was a sequel ; at all events, he made no further objections. His manner changed to an almost submissive humbleness, and without more words he helped Bill to place the insensible woman in the sleigh.

'That's the talk,' remarked Mr. Reynolds, as he drew the sleigh robe over her. 'Now then,

Mr. Bressant, just you jump in and hold on to her, and I'll lead the horse along. We'll be there in half a shake.'

'No,' replied Bressant, after a mental conflict as violent as it was brief: 'I'll lead the horse myself.' The only pleasure now left to this young man was to insult and torture himself to the utmost of his ingenuity. He had forfeited all right to protect or care for Sophie, and it was with a savage satisfaction that he resigned it to Bill Reynolds, as being the worthier and better man. It was the quixotism of self-degradation, but was doubtless not without some wholesome influence.

In three minutes more they were at the Parsonage gate. They made a stretcher of the sleigh robe, and carried Sophie in on it. The gate, flapping to behind them, sounded like a fretful and querulous complaint. As they mounted the porch steps, which creaked and crackled beneath their weight, the door was opened by Cornelia, in her travelling dress. Her face expressed so vividly the unspeakable horror which she felt as her eyes rested on her sister's half-opened lids, that Bressant, seeing it, was stricken anew with the perception of his

own misery. As Cornelia looked up from the pure and innocent features—which never had worn an awful and forbidding expression until now, when all power of expression was gone—her glance and Bressant's met; but, after a moment's encounter, both dropped their eyes, with an involuntary shudder. Their trial and sentence were condensed into so seemingly brief a space.

But Bill Reynolds neither dealt in nor appreciated such refinements upon the good old ways of communicating sentiments.

'Good evening, Miss Val'yon,' exclaimed he. 'I guess we didn't expect to see one another again to-night. Pray don't imagine, Miss, that I bear you any grudge. At times like this personal considerations don't count—not with me. I'll shake hands with you, Miss Val'yon, first chance I get, and we'll be just as much friends as ever we was before. That's the right way, I guess.'

The door of the guest-chamber stood open, and the sleigh robe, with its burden, was laid upon the bed whereon Bressant had spent so many weary days. Then the voice of the Professor, who had been awakened by the

noise and the sound of feet, was heard from the top of the stairs, demanding to know what was the matter.

‘Come down,’ said Bressant, stepping to the guest-chamber door. ‘Be quick!’

He spoke more slowly and deeply than was his wont. In spite—or perhaps in consequence—of his abasement, forlornness, and unworthiness, he showed a dignity and impressiveness which were novel in him. The boyishness, vivacity, and motion had quite vanished. There was a depth and hollowness in his eyes which gave a singular power to his face. There must have been a vein of genuine strength and nobleness in the man, or he would have been too much crushed to show anything but weak despair or brutal sullenness. Had Professor Valeyon’s attention been directed to the point, he might have recognised his pupil as being now thoroughly grounded in the elements of emotional experience.

The old gentleman, in dressing-gown and slippers, came thumping hastily downstairs, in response to Bressant’s summons. The strange solemnity in the latter’s tone, no less than the ominousness of the hour, probably gave him

premonition of some disaster. He reached the threshold of the room, and paused a moment there, settling his spectacles with trembling fingers, and looking from one silent face to another. The room was lighted only by the declining moon, which shone coldly through the windows. The bed, and that which was on it, were in shadow. In an instant or two, however, the Professor's eyes made the discovery to which none of those who stood about had had the nerve to help him. And then the old man proved himself to be the most stout-hearted of them all. He only said 'Sophie!' in a voice so profoundly indrawn as scarcely to be audible; then walked unfalteringly across the room, bent over the bed, and proceeded to examine whether there were yet life in his daughter, or not. Even the moonlight seemed to wait and listen.

'Bring a candle,' said he, presently, breaking the awful silence.

Cornelia brought it, and the warmer light inspired a sickly flicker of hope into the expectant faces. The little ormolu clock on the mantel-piece whirred, and struck half-past one. As the ring of the last stroke faded away,

Professor Valeyon raised himself, and turned his face towards the others. So strongly did his soul inform his harsh and deeply-lined features, it seemed, for a moment, as if there were a majestic angel where he stood.

‘Be of good cheer,’ quoth the old man—for no smaller words than those which Christ had spoken seemed adequate to clothe his thought—‘she is not dead: we shall hear her speak again.’

Bressant threw up his arms, as if about to shout aloud; but only gave utterance to a gasping breath, and, stepping backwards, leant heavily against the wall, near the door. Cornelia, standing at the centre of the room, broke into quivering, lingering sobs, opening and clenching her hands, which hung at her side. Bill Reynolds, however, being overcome with joy, at once gave intelligible manifestation of it.

‘Good enough!’ cried he, slapping his leg, and looking from one to another, with a giggle of relief. ‘Bully for her! Bless you, *I* knew Sophie Val’yon warn’t dead. Speak again! I believe you! *She’ll* tell us what’s the matter, I guess.’

Professor Valeyon rapidly and collectedly

gave his directions as to what steps were to be taken, and in a few minutes everything was being done that skill could do. ! Snow was brought in to encourage back the life it had dismayed, and camphor and coffee awaited their turn to take part in the resuscitation. Slow and reluctant it was, like dragging a dead weight up from an unknown depth. More than another hour had passed away before Sophie's eyelids quivered, and a slight tremor moved her lips.

By and bye she opened her eyes, slowly and uncertainly—let them close again—and once more opened them ; and, after several inaudible efforts, there came, like an echo from an immeasurable distance, one word, twice repeated—

‘ Bressant ! Bressant ! ’

They looked around for him, but he was not in the room, nor in the house. Questioning among themselves, none could tell whether it were an hour or a minute since he had departed. When life began to take fresh hold on her he had so loved and wronged, his heart had failed him, and, without a word, he had gone out and away. But not to escape ; for on no heart was the weight of sorrow and suffering so heavy as on his.

CHAPTER XIII.

MOTHER AND SON.

THE grand ball at Abbie's was still in progress, though showing signs of approaching dissolution, when Bressant entered the house quietly at a side-door, and crept up to his room. He wished not to be seen or heard by anybody ; but it happened that Abbie saw him, and the sight partly alarmed and partly relieved her. She could now account for the mysterious disappearance of Cornelia, some hours before. But why had Bressant returned so secretly ? and why were his movements all so surreptitious ? Something must be out of order, either at the Parsonage or elsewhere. She reflected and conjectured, and of course became momentarily more and more uneasy. Nor did a short visit to his door relieve her apprehensions : a confused and nondescript sound had proceeded from within, as if the young man were packing

up. Whither could he be going, she asked herself, on the very eve of his marriage?

It is never difficult to find cause for anxiety ; but it seemed to Abbie that the misgivings she entertained were reasonable and logical. Bressant had made up his mind to desert Sophie, because the fortune which he had all his life considered his own, turned out to belong to another, on whose generosity he was too proud or too suspicious to depend. He was going off, either to struggle through poverty to a fortune of his own making, or, giving himself up to his misfortune, to remain all his life in want and misery ; or, perhaps—Abbie did not openly admit this alternative, but still, knowing what she thought she did of his nature, and the circumstances, the suspicion had existence—perhaps, in conjunction with a certain evil-disposed person in New York, he contemplated by fraudulently absconding.

Now, Abbie imagined that the key whereby alone all these difficulties could be unlocked, lay in her own hands. It was a key of which, so long as her own interest alone had been concerned, she had refused to avail herself ; but when the welfare of those she loved was

called into question, she made up her mind (in spite of pride—her strongest passion next to love) to make use of it without hesitation.

When the last guests had taken their departure, Abbie went to her room, and looked at herself in the glass, by the light of a kerosene lamp. She was dressed plainly, though becomingly enough, in black silk; a lace cap rested on her grey hair; her face was worn and wrinkled, but had a fine expression about it, that would have re-called former beauty to the memory of anyone who had known her in early life. She was deeply excited, without being at all nervous, the excitement being so profoundly rooted as to be really a part of herself.

‘Why am I happy?’ she asked herself. ‘No, not because I’ve buried all my pride. Because I’ve found a reason to justify me in burying it: that’s why!’

She went, for the third time that night, to Bressant’s door, and this time turned the latch and pushed it open. He was sitting at his table, with his head on his arms. His trunk and a large iron-bound box lay packed and strapped beneath the window, which was thrown wide

open. The rush of air between that and the door roused the young man : he got slowly to his feet, and came forwards.

‘I don’t want to see you,’ said he, with a heavy utterance. ‘I warn you to go away. You and I had better have nothing to say to each other.’

‘We must ; the time to speak has come !’ she returned. ‘I’ve come to you, because you could not bring yourself to rely on me. It’s your own want of faith——’

‘You’d better not go on,’ interrupted Bressant, with a strange smile. ‘I had more faith than you imagine. But there are some mountains that faith can’t move.’

‘Why do you still keep me off?’ cried Abbie, in a tone which might have made his heart bleed, except that of late it had been stabbed so often. ‘Good God ! am I so repulsive to you that, for the sake of being happy and comfortable all your life, you can’t bring yourself to recognise my existence ? Don’t imagine I want to buy your love or toleration with this money of mine. I want nothing in exchange—nothing ! I can’t help the knowledge that I shall have made you rich, and so put happiness in your

power ; but I ask no acknowledgment—no return. Take everything and go ! Leave me here and believe that I am dead ! Is that enough ?’

‘A great deal too much ! You’ll be sorry you’ve said all this. If you knew what you were talking about, you wouldn’t have said a word of it.’

‘Oh, you are hard to please, indeed !’ exclaimed Abbie, gazing at him and shuddering. ‘I pray God your heart is so cold to no one else as to me ! Poor Sophie ! She would die at one such word.’

‘Don’t speak her name,’ said Bressant, in a tone so stern as to be equivalent to a threat.

He held his eyes down, so that the ugly gleam in them was hidden. Abbie had no thought of fearing him as yet, and she would have her say.

‘Do you think I don’t know you’re going to leave her ? If it’s because you don’t love her, I can say no more. You are beyond any help in this world. But if you do, let me save her, even if I must oblige you in doing it ! You know little of her love, though, if you think she can be happier with you rich than poor. Oh ! are you so cold yourself as to believe you are

acting generously to her in this? Go back to her, or she will die !’

The old woman took fire as she spoke, and many of the signs of age were for the time obliterated. Some of the power and brilliancy of her youth shone again in her eyes ; her form seemed to acquire a different and statelier contour. In the earnestness of her speech, involuntary gestures accompanied her words ; free from all exaggeration, and so truly and gracefully fitted to her meaning as to be virtually invisible. But Bressant was not won by it : his expression grew more ugly and repellant with every successive sentence.

‘ You fool !’ said he, coming one heavy step nearer, and frowning down upon her ; ‘ I warned you away ; I told you to be silent. You’ve meddled with what was no concern of yours ; you’ve thrust yourself where you had no right to come ——’

‘ No right !’ she interrupted, with an intensity of indignant emphasis that seemed adequate to smite to the ground the towering figure that faced her. Then, clasping her hands, and in a voice of yearning, ineffable tenderness, she added, ‘ Oh, I have prayed for you, and wept

for you, and loved you so ! For your own sake, my darling, do not use such words to me !' Here she held out her arms, and tears ran hot down her faded cheeks. 'Am I not your mother? Are you not my son?'

'No !' answered Bressant.

He threw so tremendous a weight of malignant energy into the utterance of this single word, although not raising his voice higher than his usual tone, that the moral effect upon the woman was as if he had dealt her a furious blow on the breast. Completely stunned at first, she stood as if dead, except that her body, upright and rigid, vibrated slightly from side to side, like a column about to fall. So sudden, too, had been the shock, that her arms still remained outstretched, and the track of her tears still glistened upon her cheeks, tears shed so utterly in vain as to acquire a trait of ghastly absurdity.

As sense and reflection began to dawn again, the first instinctive defence she attempted was that of incredulity. It was to gain breathing space rather than from any hope in its efficacy. But afterwards, following the ability to hear and the capacity to comprehend, the grim reality settled darkly down. Her life for the last twenty-

five years, then, had been a miserable blunder ; her love, hopes, and fears wasted, and turned to ridicule ; her self-sacrifice, a wretched self-deception, a throwing of all possibilities of happiness into the bottomless pit, whence no return could ever come to her ; every thought, aspiration, and desire which had visited her heart had been a mockery—meaningless and empty. This was the reality to which she was awakened. And, lest this should not be sufficient, here stood one before whom she had abased and humbled herself, whose insolence she had borne meekly and lovingly, whose feet she had set upon her neck. Here he stood, insolent and unfeeling still ; a false impostor, whom might God refuse to pardon !

And who and what was he ? Oh, what punishment was terrible enough for him ? Surely—surely God would not allow him to escape ! What was he ?

These thoughts must have written themselves in the woman's eyes, which were now awful to behold—eager, questioning, and malevolent. Bressant forced a harsh laugh, as men will when they find themselves opposed by impotent rage. Certainly Abbie had no other claim to be con-

sidered an amusing spectacle. Had not her revengeful rage upheld her, she must have swooned. But it was a hideous kind of vitality, unwholesome to contemplate. Bressant laughed by main strength.

‘You can’t solace yourself even with that,’ said he, shaking his head. ‘Up to three days ago I was as much in ignorance as you. It was no fault and no concern of mine; you and Professor Valeyon chose to deceive yourselves, and me. Nobody can be more innocent than I! Nobody can regret more, on some accounts, that our relationship is no closer!’

In this last sentence the tone of mockery he had assumed was somewhat overstrained; a suspicion of underlying sincerity grated through it.

‘Don’t say you didn’t know!’ said Abbie, in a guttural voice, claspings and wringing her hands, and turning her head from one side to the other; ‘don’t dare to say it! No—no! you did—you did! You did know it, and God will punish you—God will condemn you! He must—He will!’ She could not endure to believe that, having been defrauded in her love, she was to be defrauded also in her hate and thirst for

revenge. She could live by either; but to be deprived of both was death!

Bressant made no reply to her uncanny petition, and a silence followed. Abbie stood wringing her hands, waving her head, and drawing her breath sobbingly between her teeth. Was she the same woman—stately, and almost beautiful—who had spoken so loftily and tenderly but a few minutes before? Are human generosity and affection founded on no securer basis? Her appearance was now revolting. Suddenly a thought struck her.

‘Ah! but she—*she* can’t escape,’ she broke forth, seizing upon the idea with a grisly eagerness of exultation. ‘You can’t get *her* away from me; I know her, oh! I know her, and I condemn her, I hate her—God! how I hate her. She shall never be forgiven—never, never. You can never cheat me out of *her*, for I know her.’ Abbie pressed both hands to her head.

‘You had better hold your tongue, old woman,’ Bressant said, in a low voice, and a deadlier passion than anger looked from his eyes as he fastened them upon her. ‘You’re so hungry to send a soul to hell, take care you don’t find yourself there. Do you think your past life can

save you? Wait till I've told you what it has been. You began by blasting a true man's life, trusting too easily against all internal evidence to the lies that were told you about him. Next, you married the liar, not loving him, but so that the other might hear of it, and believe you had forgotten him; so you acted a lie to him, and prostituted yourself bodily and spiritually to gratify your pride and revenge. Not the sort of thing that gets people to heaven, so far, is it?'

Abbie still pressed her hands to her head, and stared before her without speaking.

'You were false to your marriage vows; after that, you neglected your husband no less than he you; you never tried to make yourself loveable to him; you were the only wronged one! you could do no wrong yourself! At last you had a son.'

She raised her eyes, which, during the last few minutes had become bloodshot, and fixed them fearfully upon the young man's face, as he continued.

'You loved him, as most females do love their young, and yet not so generously as most. It was not as his father's child, but only as your

own, that he was dear to you ; he was *your* child, a part of yourself, and you loved him only because you loved yourself.

‘ When he was still a baby you left your husband’s house, and thereby, if justice were done, forfeited the recognition of good women, and pure society ; but you took great credit to yourself because you left your son and your money behind you. Was it nothing in the balance, then, the scandal, worse than any poverty, which the recovery of your property would have caused ? Nothing but self-sacrifice, to leave a sickly child to all the advantages that wealth could give it ? Well, a month afterwards, in spite of wealth, your son died.’

At this announcement, Abbie’s convulsive strength, which had thus far served to keep her erect and motionless, exhaled itself in a long groan, and left her placid and nerveless. Seeing her about to fall, Bressant put forth his hands and grasped her arms below the shoulder, holding her thus while he went on. Her eyes were closed and her head fell forward on her bosom ; but so blinded was the young man by the remorseless passion which had gradually been working up within him, he failed to perceive

that the old woman's ears were no longer sensible to his voice, nor her heart sensitive to his words.

‘He died, and I was younger than he, but stronger, and more like my father. I was put in his place, and was called by his name. I grew up proud of what I thought my aristocratic birth! I resolved to become the most famous of mankind, and I found an angel and was going to marry her. But the evil began to come with the good: it began long ago, and in many ways, and I tried to overcome it, or provide against it one way or another. You benevolent people had led me into a battle-field, unarmed, and then left me to fight my way through; and I should have done it, too, but at the last I had myself to fight against, and then *I* gave in. Why, *I* had been dead and buried more than twenty years—why don't you laugh at that?—and had been imposed upon all that time by this miserable, nameless outcast, myself! whose father's name was Adultery and his mother's Sin. That was a parentage to be proud of, wasn't it? And yet I swear before God I'm better contented it should be so, than to be the son of an honest marriage, with such a woman as you for my mother.’

As he loosened the hold of one hand, to emphasise this oath, the senseless body, which he had been upholding, swung around, and swayed towards the floor. He dropped the arm which remained in his grasp, and the red flush on his cheek and forehead died away into pallor, as he looked down at the dark heap of clothes lying at his feet. Finally he stooped down, and lifted her on to the sofa.

‘She’s not dead,’ muttered he, after scrutinizing the woman’s face for a moment; ‘she has her punishment, though, like the rest of us.’

He wrote an address on a couple of pieces of paper which he found in the drawer of the table, and fastened them to the box and trunk with some mucilage. Then he took his fur cap, and having banged on the fat Irish servant girl’s door, and told her that her mistress was lying insensible in his study, he left the house without delay. It wanted still an hour to the time for the earliest morning train to New York, and as the young man did not care to subject himself to questions and remarks from the officials at the village dépôt he determined to walk down the track, a distance of between four and five miles, to the station below. Off he started accord-

ingly, and arriving there in ample time, was able to eat a good breakfast of cold meat, hard-boiled eggs, and crackers—all the solid contents of the refreshment room—before his train got in. He bought his ticket, stepped on board, flung himself into a seat, and left all behind him.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHERE TWO ROADS MEET.

THE velvet-cushioned seat on which he sat felt very comfortable, and the great speed at which he was being carried along was agreeable to him. He had been busily occupied, with little rest of any kind, and scarcely any sleep, for nearly three days; and his mind had been all the time engrossed by the most harrowing thoughts and experiences. It was all over now: nothing could ever again give him apprehension or anxiety: the past was dead and never could live again: the future was arranged, and it was simple enough: he, and the woman who had given him birth, would sail together for Europe on Monday morning, at twelve o'clock. He would have abundant wealth—all the property had been converted into ready money, and would be taken with them—and

he might live as luxuriously, as sensually, as much like a pampered animal as he pleased, or as he could. He would forget that he had a mind, or a heart, or a soul : they had none of them served him in good stead : but he had some reliance on his body. There were few that could compare with it in the world, and he felt convinced that he should be able to derive a great deal of enjoyment out of it before the time for its death and decay came round. At all events, he was resolved that no form of indulgence to his bodily appetites should go unproved ; and when one grew stale he would try another. With such enormous vitality and capacity to be and to appreciate being voluptuous, he could hardly fail to avenge himself for the hardships he had undergone thus far.

So he leant back on the crimson velvet cushion of his seat, and felt very comfortable and composed, thinking of nothing in particular. He became pleasantly interested, as the daylight began to make things visible without, in trying to count the number of wires on the telegraph poles. It would have been easy enough if they had only kept along at an

invariable level ; but they were always rising—rising—then jumping through the pole with a snap !—then ducking suddenly—sinking, crossing one another—sometimes scudding along close to the ground, then flying up beyond the range of the window—anon scooting beneath a dark arch—now indistinguishable against a pine wood—then rising—rising—jumping—ducking—sinking—as before. Though exerting all his faculties of observation, it was impossible to be quite certain how many wires there were.

He was nearly alone in the car, and would probably continue to be for an hour or so at least. He reversed the seat in front of him, and put up his feet, leaving the telegraph wires to scud and dodge unnoticed. He fixed his eyes upon the sweltering stove in the further corner of the car. There was a roaring fire within, as he could tell by the vivid red that glowed through the draught-holes beneath the door, and showed here and there along the cracks. The sides of the car against which the stove stood were protected with zinc ; a number of short sticks of wood were piled beside it, ready to replenish the fire, and some of them were already smoking a little, as if in

anticipation. Presently the brakeman came in, with a flurry of cold air, his neck and head rolled up in a dirty brown knit woollen tippet, and clumsy gloves on his hands. He took the poker, and opened the stove door with it, peeped into the red-hot interior a moment, grasped a solid chunk of wood from the pile, and popped it in cleverly; then he stood for a moment, patting the stove with his gloved hands, to warm them, till, in response to the whistle, he dashed out, slamming the door as only car doors can be made to slam, and Bressant could dimly distinguish him, through the frosted window, working away at the brake.

They drew up, with much squeaking and grating, at a small, snuff-coloured, clap-boarded dépôt, where a boy, about sixteen, with a big green carpet-bag, kissed an elderly lady in a black hood, who was evidently his mother, and jumped aboard with his bag, in a great hurry, lest she should behold the tears in his eyes. He entered the car in which Bressant sat, and established himself and his bag on the seat immediately in front of that upon which the former's feet were resting.

The snuff-coloured station, and the woman in the black hood slipped away, and were seen no more. The boy, after scratching a peep-hole through the frost-work on his window, and taking a last survey through it of the snow-covered fields he was leaving, produced a large blue-spotted handkerchief from the pocket of his trousers, and retired with it into the privacy of his own feelings.

He was a rather delicate-looking boy, with large grey eyes and soft brown hair, and was evidently not much in the habit of travelling. Perhaps this was the first time he had ever left home, thought Bressant, in the idleness of his inactive mind. His mother was a widow: her dark dress and black hood, and pale, over-worked face looked like it. Besides, if the boy had had a father, of course he would have been down to see him off. Probably there were sisters, too: the boy looked somehow as if he had been brought up with sisters; but they would not have followed him down to the station: they kissed him good-bye at the house door, leaving it to his mother to see the very last of him. For he had resolved to go forth into the world and make his fortune, not to

encumber his poor mother with his support any longer. He was going, probably to New York, to be a clerk or an errand-boy in some dry-goods store, or banking-house, or insurance office. Once a week—oftener, perhaps—he would write home to his mother, sending his love to her and to the girls, telling them how much he wanted to see them all again, but that he was doing pretty well, and was working, and going to work, very hard. He would be rich some day, and they should all come to New York then and live in his house on Fifth Avenue !

Bressant, comfortably extended on his two seats, with his long future of bodily ease and indulgence opening before him—his freedom from all ties to bind him to any spot, or necessities to compel him to any labour—Bressant found that the thought of this innocent boy, going forth into the world with his green carpet-bag, his loving heart, his assurance of being loved, his ambition to establish his mother and sisters on Fifth Avenue, was becoming quite annoying to his mental serenity. He would think of him no more, therefore ; and to aid himself in this resolve he closed his eyes, so as

to avoid seeing him. Being really somewhat weary after his manifold exertions and continued sleeplessness, his eyes closed very naturally.

But the boy was not to be so easily got rid of. He almost immediately turned round in his seat, and directed a steadfast gaze out of his grey eyes at Bressant's reclining figure. Presently he pronounced, in a low voice, yet which was distinctly audible to the deaf man's ears, two words, the effect of which was to make the other start up in his seat and stare about him in amazement and alarm. The boy met his glance with great calmness and gentleness, and held out his hand as if to grasp Bressant's.

'Was it you?' exclaimed the latter, bewildered. 'How did you know that name, and who are you?' As he spoke, he mechanically took the extended hand in his own.

'Why, don't you know me?' answered the boy, smiling, and at the same time drawing him, by a slight, but decided, traction, to sit down by him. 'Me—your best friend?'

Something in the voice, something in the manner, and in the expression of the eyes, but most of all the smile, seemed strangely familiar to Bressant. The touch of the hand, too, he

thought he recognised : it soothed, and yet controlled, him. Still, he was unable to recall exactly who the boy was, or where he had seen him before.

‘I’ve had so much to think of lately,’ murmured he, partly to himself, partly by way of excusing his forgetfulness, passing his hand over his forehead.

‘Yes, indeed!’ returned the latter, in a tone of tender sympathy, that vibrated gratefully along Bressant’s nerves. ‘But we know each other, and we are friends : that is enough.’

‘How strange that I should meet you here, and at such a time!’ said Bressant, musingly. And he wondered at himself for feeling glad instead of sorry that the encounter should have taken place. But the boy looked up in surprise.

‘Strange? No! I’m sure it’s the most natural thing in the world. How could it have happened otherwise? Should I have been your friend if I had failed you now?’

‘But do you know everything?’ Bressant demanded—less, however, because he doubted that it should be so than as wishing to receive full assurance thereof. ‘Do you know all that

has happened during these last six months, and yet are willing to be with me and speak to me ?'

'It has been a terrible time, to be sure,' said the boy, sadly ; 'you should have kept your promise and come to me at your first trouble. It might have saved you from a great deal. And yet I can see how, in the end, it may all be for the best.'

Bressant shook his head dejectedly. 'I've lost what I never can regain !' said he. 'And there are three stains—falsehood, dishonour, and treachery—that never can be washed out.'

'Don't say that !' exclaimed the boy, earnestly and hopefully. 'God teaches us, you know, not to be in despair, because without hope—hope of becoming better—we can't be really repentant.'

'I am not repentant certainly : I have no hope,' rejoined Bressant. But even as he spoke the words, he was conscious of that within him which contradicted them. Either the influence of the boy's gentle and trustful spirit, or a new opening of his own inward eyes had borne in upon him a vision of hitherto unconsidered possibilities.

The boy seemed to read his thoughts. 'You

do not believe all you say,' observed he. 'Remember, it was because you repented of your dishonest purposes towards Abbie, and felt that you had wronged your better self with Cornelia, that you first resolved to give up Sophie, as being no longer worthy of her. And that proved that your love for her at least was noble and unselfish.'

'But afterwards—afterwards I became worse than ever!' exclaimed Bressant, who would not dare to entertain a hope until the full depth of his sin had been brought forward, for the pure and clear-sighted eyes of his companion to look upon and judge. 'When I found out my shameful secret, when I learned what a thing I was, even with no sin of my own to drag me down—I didn't care what crime I committed! A kind of evil intelligence seemed to come to me: I saw that Cornelia loved me, and that I had her in my power. So I went back to get her, to take her with me to Europe. There was no repentance in that!'

'It would have been a terrible sin!' said the boy, with a slight shudder. 'But God prevented you from committing it.'

'But I'm a thief still, and a coward; for I

sneaked away in the night, fearing to meet Sophie's eyes, and afraid to tell the Professor what I was and what I had done. I left all the burden of my sins to be borne by women and an infirm old man. And I am going, with a stolen fortune, to forget I ever had a heart or a soul.'

'Are you going, and do you think you can forget?' asked the boy, with a smile.

'Don't you give me up yet?' returned Bressant, trembling. 'What is left for me?'

'Why, everything is left for you!' exclaimed the boy, his smile brightening in his eyes. 'You seem to forget that you haven't gone off with any stolen money yet! You must begin at the next station, and devote your whole life—no less will answer—to redeeming yourself. Only be sure not to delay and not to hesitate.'

Bressant looked at his companion, and thought there was something divine and unearthly almost in his manner, and especially in the light that came from his grey eyes.

'As for the stolen money,' the boy continued, 'all you have to do about that is to let it alone; it is safe and will be cared for. But you must go straight to the Parsonage. Your marriage day

is Sunday ; be sure you are there by noon. It may be you will not find Sophie there ; but she will leave a gift for you at any rate, and you must be in time to claim it.'

'But how can I ask Sophie's forgiveness, and the Professor, and Cornelia?'

'Trust wholly in Sophie,' returned the other, with an accent of loving reproof, 'never doubt her love and forgiveness. You must make your peace with the Professor as best you can ; but perhaps he has found that to forgive in himself, which will enable him to be more charitable to you. As for Cornelia, she and you must recompense each other for the evil you have mutually wrought upon each other.'

'How recompense each other?' questioned Bressant, in surprise ; 'it was not a high nor a true love that we felt for each other ; it was a love of the passions and senses.'

'Therefore let it be the work of your lives—a work of penitence and punishment—to elevate and refine your love, which has been degraded, until it become worthy of the name of love in its highest sense. You have lowered each other, and now each must help to raise the other up. The work can be delegated to no one else.'

‘But Sophie,’ murmured Bressant, pressing his hand over his eyes.

‘Sophie is lost to you,’ responded his companion, with a tremulous sigh. ‘Perhaps if you had kept yourself pure and true through all temptations she might have been yours. But you failed, and every failure must bring its loss. The air of such a love as that is too fine for you to breathe now ; you could not be happy nor at ease ; but do not grieve for her—only mourn for your own deterioration, and strive faithfully, and with constant effort, to make it good. Sophie—she will be happier, and better cared for, than, as your wife, she could ever have been.’

‘But I shall go back to poverty and disgrace, and perhaps to hatred !’

‘The evil you have done will be a clog upon you ; but its very weight will assure you that your face is turned towards heaven. Life will never be to you what you dreamed of making it six months ago. You will find it hard and practical, weary and monotonous ; but once in awhile, perhaps, you will catch a breath of air from heaven itself, and will be refreshed, or a ray of its light will glimmer on your path, and

show you where to tread. The end may be a long way off, but you cannot say you have no chance of reaching it.'

'Oh! if I only might,' sighed he; 'but I've been nothing but a curse, so far, to every one I've known!'

'Not so, either,' returned his companion, with a smile so celestial, that Bressant knew at last it could be no other than the spirit of Sophie herself that had been speaking to him. 'You have shaken Professor Valeyon's confidence in his wisdom and judgment, and the value of his experience; you have made him realise that the more God has to do with education the better; you have broken down Cornelia's self-complacency, and shown her that a beautiful body cannot be safe or happy without a soul to take care of it. Abbie has learnt from you that love, and generosity, and self-sacrifice may all be worthless if they be founded only upon individual grounds, to the exclusion of humanity; and Sophie has been taught by the love she has felt for you to be humble and charitable, and to see how easily self-interest and pride may be made to look like zeal for others, and benevolence.'

And then Bressant seemed to be conscious that Sophie was bidding him farewell, but he could not see her, nor touch her; he was shaken with grief, and yet was filled with a strange kind of happiness, and a feeling of resolute power. Gradually the influence of her presence faded away, and he seemed alone.

Some one shook him by the shoulder. He looked up and saw the conductor; in the background a lady and gentleman waiting to sit down. The car was full of people.

‘Come, sir,’ said the conductor, ‘you’re a pretty big man, but you didn’t pay for more than one seat, I reckon. You’ve been sleeping here for more than a hundred miles; if you want to sleep any more I expect you’d better get out and go to a hotel.’

Bressant removed his feet from the extra seat, and the conductor having reversed it, the lady and gentleman took their places. As for the boy with the green bag, and the blue-spotted handkerchief, he was no where to be seen; he must have left the train at a previous station.

The train had stopped, and Bressant, glancing out of the window, saw that they were at some large railway junction.

‘How far are we from New York?’ he asked of the conductor, with his hand to his ear to catch the reply.

‘Be there in two hours,’ shouted back that gentleman, in reply.

‘When does the next train go through here in the opposite direction?’

‘We’re just a-waiting for one to come along, and give us the track—and there she is now,’ returned the conductor, as he took his departure.

The whistle screamed malevolently, and, with a jerk and a rattle, the car began to move off. Bressant rose suddenly from his seat, walked quickly along the aisle to the door, passed through to the platform, grasped the iron balustrade with one hand, and swung himself lightly to the ground. The whistle screamed again like a disappointed fiend.

‘Guess that young man was up late last night,’ remarked the conductor to the brakeman; ‘a powerful sound sleep he was in, any how.’

‘Off on a spree to New York, most like,’ responded the brakeman, tightening his dirty brown tippet around his neck, ‘and thought better of it at the last minute.’

CHAPTER XV.

TILL THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

HER fruitless call for Bressant seemed quite to exhaust Sophie. For a long time afterwards she hardly opened her mouth, except to swallow some hot black coffee. The Professor sat, for the most part, with his finger on her pulse, his eyes looking more hollow, and his forehead more deeply lined than ever before, but with no other signs of anxiety or suffering. Cornelia came in and out—a restless spirit. She awaited Sophie's recovery with no less of dread than of hope. Her life hung, as it were, upon her sister's. The moment in which Sophie recovered her faculties enough to think and speak, would be the last that Cornelia could maintain her mask of honour and respectability, for Cornelia knew that Sophie was in possession of her secret ; she had been up in her room, and the open window had told the story.

It was a time of awful suspense. Cornelia wished there had been somebody there to talk with ; even Bill Reynolds would have been welcome, now. He, however, had departed long ago, having bethought himself that his horse was catching its death a-cold, standing out there with no rug on. She was entirely alone ; she hardly dared to think, for fear something guilty should be generated in her mind ; and though every moment was pain, without stop or mitigation, every moment was inestimably precious, too ; it was so much between her and revelation. She almost counted the seconds as they passed, yet rated them for dragging on so wearily. Every tick of the little ormolu clock marked away a large part of her life, and yet was wearisome to so much of it as remained. Sometimes she debated whether she could not anticipate the end by speaking out at once, of her own free will ; but no, short as her time was, she could not afford to lose the smallest fraction of it—no, she could not.

Bethinking herself that her father would be lost to her after the revelation had taken place, Cornelia felt a consuming desire to enjoy his love to the fullest possible extent during the

interval. She wanted to have him call her his dear daughter—to hold her hand—to pat her cheek—to kiss her forehead with his rough bristly lips—to tell her, in his gruff, kind voice, that she was a solace and a resource to him. The thousand various little ways in which he had testified his deep-lying affection—she had not noticed them or thought much of them, so long as she felt secure of always commanding them—with what different eyes she looked back upon them now. Oh! if they might all be lavished upon her during these last few remaining hours, or minutes. Should she not go and sit down at his knee, and ask him to pet her and caress her?

No; she would not steal the love for which her soul thirsted, even though he whom she robbed should not feel the loss. She had stripped him of much that would doubtless seem to him of far more worth and importance; but when it came to taking, under false pretences, a thing so sacred as her father's love, Cornelia drew back, and, spite of her great need, had the grace to make the sacrifice. Let it not be underrated: a woman who sees honour, reputation, and happiness slipping away from her, will

struggle hardest of all for the little remaining scrap of love, and only feel wholly forlorn after that, too, has vanished away.

At length, about day-break, or a little after, Sophie spoke, low, but very distinctly :

‘I’m going to sleep ; don’t wake me or disturb me ;’ and almost immediately sank into a profound slumber—so very profound, indeed, that it rather bore likeness to a trance. Yet, her pulse still beat regularly, though faintly, and at long intervals, and her breath went and came, though with a motion almost imperceptible to the eye.

‘Is it a good sign ? Will she get well now ?’ asked Cornelia, as she and her father stood looking down at her.

‘She’ll never get well, my dear,’ said Professor Valeyon, very quietly. ‘Her mind and body both have had too great a shock—far too great. More has happened than we know of yet, I suspect. But we shall hear, we shall hear. Yes, sleep is good for her : it’ll make her comfortable. Her nerves will be the quieter.’

‘Oh, papa ! papa ! is our little Sophie going to die ?’ faltered Cornelia ; and then she broke down completely. She had not fully grasped

the idea until that moment ; but the very tone in which her father spoke had the declaration of death in it. It was not his usual deep, gruff, forcible voice, shutting off abruptly at the end of his sentences, and beginning them as sharply. It had lost body and colour, was thin, subdued, and monotonous. Professor Valeyon had changed from a lusty winter into a broken, infirm, and marrowless thaw.

He stood and watched her weep for a long while, bending his eyes upon her from beneath their heavy, impending brows. Heavy and impending they were still, but the vitality—the sort of warm-hearted fierceness—of his look was gone—gone ! A young and bitter grief, like Cornelia's, coming at a time of life when the feelings are so tender and their manifestation of pain so poignant—is terrible enough to see, God knows ! But the dry-eyed anguish of the old, of those who no longer possess the latent, indefinite, all-powerful encouragement of the future to support them—who can breathe only the lifeless, cheerless air of the past—grief with them does not convulse : it saps, and chills, and crumbles away, without noise or any kind of demonstration. The sight does not terrify or

harrow us, but it makes us sick at heart and tinges our thoughts with a gloomy stain, which rather sinks out of sight than is worn away.

‘Will you stay and watch with her, my dear?’ said the old man, at last. ‘She’ll sleep some hours, I think. I’ll take a little sleep myself. Call me when she wakes.’

So Cornelia was left alone to watch her sleeping and dying sister. All the morning she sat by the bed, almost as motionless as Sophie herself. Her mind was like a surf-wave that breaks upon the shore, slips back, re-gathers itself, and undulates on, to break again. Begin where she would, she always ended on that bed, with its well-known face, set around with soft dark hair, always in the same position upon the pillow, which yielded beneath it in always the same creases and curves. By-and-bye, wherever she turned, still she saw that face, with the pillow rising around it; and when she shut her eyes, there it was, growing in the blackness, clearer the more she tried to avert her mind.

It seemed to Cornelia—for time enters involuntarily into our thoughts upon all subjects—that the present order of things must have

the idea until that moment; but the very tone in which her father spoke had the declaration of death in it. It was not his usual deep, gruff, forcible voice, shutting off abruptly at the end of his sentences, and beginning them as sharply. It had lost body and colour, was thin, subdued, and monotonous. Professor Valeyon had changed from a lusty winter into a broken, infirm, and marrowless thaw.

He stood and watched her weep for a long while, bending his eyes upon her from beneath their heavy, impending brows. Heavy and impending they were still, but the vitality—the sort of warm-hearted fierceness—of his look was gone—gone! A young and bitter grief, like Cornelia's, coming at a time of life when the feelings are so tender and their manifestation of pain so poignant—is terrible enough to see, God knows! But the dry-eyed anguish of the old, of those who no longer possess the latent, indefinite, all-powerful encouragement of the future to support them—who can breathe only the lifeless, cheerless air of the past—grief with them does not come as a sudden and crumbling avalanche. It is a slow and demonstrative process.

harrow us, but it makes us sick at heart and tinges our thoughts with a gloomy stain, which rather sinks out of sight than is worn away.

‘Will you stay and watch with her, my dear?’ said the old man, at last. ‘She’ll sleep some hours, I think. I’ll take a little sleep myself. Call me when she wakes.’

So Cornelia was left alone to watch her sleeping and dying sister. All the morning she sat by the bed, almost as motionless as Sophie herself. Her mind was like a surf-wave that breaks upon the shore, slips back, re-gathers itself, and undulates on, to break again. *Begin* where she would, she always ended on *that bed*, with its well-known face, set around with soft dark hair, always in the same position upon the pillow, which yielded beneath it in always the same creases and curves. *By-and-bye*, whenever she turned, still she saw *the* the pillow rising around it; and *when* the eyes, there it was, growing *a* clearer the more *she* tried to *see*

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harrow us, but it makes us sick at heart and tinges our thoughts with a gloomy stain, which rather sinks out of sight than is worn away.

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It seemed to Cornelia—for time enters involuntarily into our thoughts upon all subjects—that the present order of things must have

existed for a far longer period than a single night. How could the events of a few hours wear such deep and uneffaceable channels in human lives? But our souls have a chronology of their own, compared with the vividness and instantaneous workings of which our bodies bear but a dull and lagging part. Sorrow and joy, which act upon the soul immediately, must labour long ere they can write themselves legibly and permanently upon our faces.

Cornelia fell to wondering too—as most people under the pressure of grief are prone to do—whether there were any sympathy or any connection between the world and the human beings who live upon it. Her eyes wandered hither and thither about the room, and found it almost startling in its unaltered naturalness. There was the same view of trees, road, and field out of the window; and the same snow which had fallen before the tragedy, lay there now. Even in Sophie's face there was no adequate transformation. Indeed, being somewhat reddened and swollen by the re-action from freezing, a stranger might have supposed that she was tolerably stout and glowing with vitality. And Cornelia looked at her own hands, as they lay

in her lap : they were as round and shapely as ever ; and there, upon the smooth back of one, below the forefinger, was a white scar, where she had cut herself when a little girl. Moreover—Cornelia started as her eyes rested upon it, and the blood rose painfully to her face—there was a dark, discoloured bruise, encircling one wrist : Bressant's last gift—an ominous betrothal ring !

Thus several hours passed away, until, at length, Cornelia raised her eyes suddenly, and encountered those of Sophie, fixed upon her.

What a look was that ! At all times there was more to be seen in Sophie's eyes than in most women's ; but now they were fathomless, and yet never more clear and simple. Cornelia read in them all and more than legions of words could have told her. There were visible the complete grasp and appreciation of Cornelia's and Bressant's crime ; the realisation of her own position between them ; pity and sympathy for the sinners, too, were there ; and love, not sisterly, nor quite human, for Sophie had already begun to put on immortality—but such a love as an angel might have felt, knowing the temptation and the punishment. Before that look

Cornelia felt her own bitterness and anguish fade away, as a candle is obliterated by the sun. She saw in Sophie so much higher a capacity for feeling, so much profounder and more sublime an emotion, that she was ashamed of her own beside it.

There was at once a comprehensiveness and a particularity in Sophie's gaze which, while humbling and abasing Cornelia, brought a comforting feeling that full justice, upon all points, had been done her in Sophie's mind. There was no lack of charity for her trials and temptations, no vindictiveness. Cornelia felt no impulse to plead her cause, because aware that all she could say would be anticipated in her sister's forgiveness. Nay, she almost wished there had been some bitterness and anger against which to contend. Perhaps it may be so with our souls in their judgment-day : God's mercy may outstrip the poor conjectures we have formed about it. He may see palliation for our sins, which we ourselves had not taken into account.

After a few moments, Sophie beckoned Cornelia to come near, and, as the latter stood beside the bed, took her by the hand and smiled.

‘I’ve been all this time with Bressant,’ were her first words, spoken faintly, but with a quiet and serene assurance.

Cornelia made no answer : indeed she could not speak. Strange and incomprehensible as Sophie’s assertion was, she did not think of doubting but that in some way it must be true. Sophie continued :

‘Before I went to sleep, I prayed God to send my spirit to him ; and we have been together. Neelie, he is coming back !’

‘Coming back ! Sophie, coming back ! For what ?’

‘Don’t look so frightened, my darling. He will tell you why when he gets here. That will be to-morrow at noon.’

‘Oh, Sophie ! Sophie ! the day and hour of your marriage !’

Cornelia sank upon her knees, and hid her face upon the edge of the bed. But Sophie let her hand wander over her head, with a soothing motion.

‘No, dear : that’s all over, Neelie dear, you know. Not the day and hour of my marriage any more. Neelie, I want to ask you something.’

Cornelia lifted her head from the bedside ;

then, divining from Sophie's face, ere it was spoken, what her question was to be, faintness and terror seized upon her, and she clasped her hands over her eyes. The unexpectedness of Sophie's first awakening, and her subsequent strange speech concerning Bressant, had driven from Cornelia's head the matter which had monopolised her thoughts and fears before; and it now recurred to her with an effect almost as overwhelming as if the idea had been a new one.

'I couldn't do it,' said she, huskily; 'it seemed worse than killing myself. I believe it would have killed me to have stood before him, with his eyes upon my face, and have told him —told him ——'

'Yes, dear, yes; it must not be you, Neelie. How is he? Does he seem well and cheerful?'

'I don't know—I've hardly dared to look at him, or speak to him. He's been lying down, I believe, since you went to sleep.'

'Ask him to come to me,' Sophie said, after a pause. 'I will speak to him: I'll tell him: it will be best that I should do it; and you will trust me?'

'Oh! Sophie,' was all Cornelia could say;

but it expressed at least the fulness of her heart. What must be the love and tenderness that could undertake such a task as this? How great the trial for a nature delicate and shrinking, like Sophie's, to bear witness before their own father of her sister's sin against herself? But Sophie was as brave as she was feminine and delicate.

Cornelia's gratitude, however, was mingled still with a despairing agony, and her life seemed to be escaping from her. If this cup might but pass!

'He will not be to me as you are, Sophie. He will never look at me again.'

'Do not fear,' replied Sophie, with her faint, but incomparable, smile. 'If I can forgive you, surely he must. Go and call him, and then stay in your room till he comes to you.'

But Cornelia, as she left the room upon her heavy errand, shook her head, and drew a shivering breath. She knew her father would look upon the matter more from the world's point of view than Sophie did; and it was a curious example of the strength of the material element in Cornelia, that she more feared to meet her father's eye, whom she felt would

understand that aspect of her disgrace, than Sophie's, who probably had a more acute, and certainly a more exclusive perception of her spiritual accountability.

As she was beginning to mount the stairs she met her father, already on his way down. He noticed the wretchedness depicted on her face, and, supposing it to be all on Sophie's account, did what he could to comfort her.

‘Don't despair, my child,’ quoth the old man, laying his hands on her shoulders. ‘Nothing is so hopeless, that we mayn't trust in God to better it.’

The words seemed to apply so felicitously that Cornelia tried to think it a good omen sent from heaven. Then he bent over and kissed her forehead—perhaps before she was aware, perhaps not; but she took it, praying that it might prove a blessing to her hereafter, even if it were the last she were destined to receive. She passed on into her own room without speaking, and sat down there to wait.

To wait! and for what, and how long? till her father came to her? But suppose he were not to come? She would stay there, perhaps, an hour—that would be long enough—yes, too

long ; but still let it be an hour ; and then, he not coming, what should she do ? Go to him ? No, she would never dare, never presume to do that. What then ? steal down stairs, a guilty, hateful thing, softly open the door which would never open to her again, and run away through the snow ? The world would be before her, but snow and ice would but faintly symbolise its coldness. Was it likely that heaven itself would yield her entrance after her father's door had closed upon her ?'

But would not Sophie prevail and turn his heart to forgiveness ? Oh ! but why was it not probable, and more than probable, that the argument would result the other way ? that her father, by a clear and stern representation of the real heinousness of her offence, would convince Sophie that Cornelia was entitled to nothing but condemnation ? There would be nothing to urge against the justice of such a sentence—nothing.

Perhaps Sophie's courage might fail her, or her strength give way, leaving the ugly story but half told, and then her father would come to her to learn the rest. What should she do then ? How much more terrible to be obliged

to tell him then, after having made up her mind that her sister was to take the burden off her shoulders, than it would have been before any such resource had presented itself. How much more awful to meet her father when aroused by suspicion and anger, and perhaps loathing, than to begin her confession while his face was as she had always seen it when turned towards her—loving and tender.

She could not sit still, at last, but rose up from her chair to walk the room, not from the old, restless energy, which needed physical exercise to keep it within bounds—for Cornelia was now white and faint from exhaustion of mind and body ;—but from the tumult of pervading fear and delusive hope ; the attention strained to catch some sound from below, and the dread lest it should never come. As the suspense grew more painful, the rapidity of her walk increased.

She expected now, every moment, to catch herself shrieking aloud, or performing some mad action or other. How long had she been up there already ? Was it an hour yet ? It must be an hour. Oh ! it was more. Was he never coming, then ?—never ? Oh, God ! was

there no forgiveness? Cornelia's walk had gone on quickening until it was almost a run. She was circling round and round the room like a wild animal : was growing dizzy and exhausted, but was afraid to stop : better her body should give way than her mind. And all the time her ears were alert for the slightest sound.

She halted, wild-eyed, and unsteady on her feet, her hand trembling at her lips. A step in the passage below, ascending the stairs slowly and heavily. Oh ! did it come in mercy ? She tried to draw a meaning from the sound—then dared not trust her inference. The steps had gained the landing now—were advancing along the entry towards her door. Did they bear a load of sorrow only, or of hate and condemnation likewise ?

They paused at her threshold ; then there was a knock, thrice repeated ; not loud, nor rapid, nor regular, nor precise—rather as one heart might knock for admittance to another. Cornelia tried to say 'Come in,' or to open the door, but could neither speak nor move. Iron bands seemed to be clasped around all her faculties of motion. Would he go away and leave her ?

The door opened, turning slowly and hesitatingly on its hinges, until it disclosed her father's venerable figure. His limbs seemed weak, his shoulders drooped; but Cornelia looked only at his face. His eyes were deep and compassionate. He held out his arms, which shook slightly but continually: 'Come, my daughter,' said he.

She was his daughter still! She cried out, and walking hurriedly to him, laid herself close against him, and he hugged her closer yet—poor, miserable, erring creature though she was.

So the three were reunited, and not superficially, but more intimately and indissolubly than ever before. They would not be apart, but remained together in Bressant's room, Sophie on the bed, with an expression of divine contentment on her face, Cornelia and the Professor sitting near.

'Papa,' said Sophie, as the afternoon came on, 'I want to make my will.'

Cornelia caught her breath sharply, and, turning away her face, covered her eyes with her hand. Professor Valeyon's grey eyebrows gathered for a moment; then he steadied himself, and said, 'Well, my dear.'

It was not a very intricate matter: the various little bequests were soon made and noted down as she requested. After all was disposed of there was a little pause.

‘Neelie, dear,’ then said Sophie, turning her eyes full upon her, ‘I bequeath my love to you.’

Cornelia perceived the hidden significance in the words, and blushed so deep and warm that the tears were dried upon her cheeks. Sophie went on before she could make any reply,—

‘And I have something left for you too, Papa, though I know no one needs it less than you. But you may be called on for a great deal, so I bequeath you my charity. I haven’t had it so very long myself.’

The Professor bowed his head, and, the will being complete, he took off his spectacles and wiped them with his handkerchief.

‘I was telling Neelie this morning, papa,’ resumed Sophie, after a while, ‘that I had been—that I’d had a dream that I was with Bressant; and I feel sure—though I suppose you’ll think it nothing but a sick fancy of mine—that he will be here to-morrow noon.’

The Professor looked at Sophie, startled and

anxious ; but her appearance was so composed, straightforward, and full of faith, he could not think her wandering.

‘Do you know where he has been, my dear? or where he is now?’ asked he, gently.

‘I cannot tell that. I knew and understood a great deal in my dream that I cannot remember now,’ she answered. ‘I only know that he will be here to-morrow ; and papa, and you, Neelie, whether you believe as I do or not, I want you to get ready to receive him. Let it be in this dear old room—I lying here as I am now, and you sitting so beside me. We’ll wait for him to-morrow morning until twelve o’clock. If I should die before then, let my body stay here until noon, for I want him to see my face when he comes, so that he’ll always remember how happy I looked. But if, after that little clock on the mantel-piece strikes twelve, still he isn’t here, then you may do with me as you will. I shall not know, nor mind.’

After this little speech Sophie became very silent, being, in truth, too weak and worn out to speak or move, save at long, and ever longer intervals. All that night Professor Valeyon

carried an aching and mistrustful heart ; but Cornelia had a red spot in either cheek, never fading nor shifting. Sophie appeared to wander several times, murmuring something about darkness, and snow, and deadly weariness. A snow-storm had set in towards evening, and lasted until daybreak, a circumstance which seemed to cause Sophie considerable anxiety.

By ten o'clock all the preparations were made according to Sophie's wish, and there was nothing to do but to wait. Cornelia sat brooding with folded arms, and the feverish spots on her cheeks. Occasionally she restlessly varied her position, seldom allowing her eyes to stray around the room, however, save that once in a while they sought Sophie's colourless, ethereal face, as a thirsty soul the water. The Professor stood much at the window, and once or twice he imagined he caught a glimpse, somewhere down the road, of a darkly-clad woman's figure ; but she never came nearer, and he decided it must be a hallucination of his fading eyes.

Eleven o'clock struck from the little ormolu time-piece. A few moments afterwards Sophie stirred slightly as she lay, and the Professor

and Cornelia listened breathlessly for what she would say.

She lifted her heavy lids, and turned her eyes, a little dimmer now than heretofore, but steady and confident, first on her father, then on her sister.

‘Till noon—remember!’ said she.

Nothing more was heard, after that, but the hasty ticking of the little ormolu clock, as its hands travelled steadily around the circle.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HOUR AND THE MAN.

BRESSANT jumped on to the platform of the newly arrived train. The cars were pretty full; but coming at last to a vacant seat by the side of a clean shaven gentleman with a straight, hard mouth, and a glossy brown wig, curling smoothly inwards all around the edge, he dropped into it without ceremony.

The train left the dépôt and hurried away over the road which Bressant had just traversed in the opposite direction. He sat with his arms folded, appearing to take no notice of anything, and his neighbour with the wig read the latest edition of a New York paper with stern attention, occasionally altering the position of his stove-pipe hat on his head. By-and-bye, the conductor, a small, precise man, with a dark, blue coat, cap to match, a neatly trimmed sandy beard, shaved upper lip, and an utterance as

distinct and clippy as the holes his steel punch made in the tickets, came along upon his rounds.

Bressant put his hands into his pockets, and discovered, with some consternation, that he had but a comparatively small amount of money left; his newly-accepted poverty was certainly losing no time in making itself felt. However, such as it was, he handed it to the conductor, and enquired how near it would take him to his proposed destination?

"Eighty-one miles, rail," responded the official, as he took and clipped the ticket of the gentleman with the newspaper; 'comes shorter by road, seventy-four to seventy-five,' and he proceeded down the aisle, snapping up tickets on one side or the other, as a hen does grains of corn.

Bressant covered his eyes with his hand, and amused himself by performing a little sum in mental arithmetic.

The amount of money he had given the conductor represented a distance which it would take a certain length of time—say four hours—to traverse. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon, and consequently would be eight be-
that distance was accomplished. From

eight o'clock Saturday night, till twelve o'clock Sunday noon, was sixteen hours, and in sixteen hours he must travel, on foot, and through the snow, seventy-five miles of unknown roads.

'Four and a half miles an hour, and nothing to eat since breakfast,' said Bressant to himself. He took his hand from his eyes, and passed it down his face to his beard, which he twisted and turned unmercifully. 'It's lucky it isn't any more,' remarked he, philosophically.

In the course of half an hour or so, the straight-mouthed gentleman, having finished the last column of his paper, folded it up into the smallest possible compass, and handed it politely to Bressant. The latter accepted it abstractedly, and opening one fold, read the first paragraph which presented itself, his interest increasing as he proceeded. It was in the column of latest local news, and after bewailing, in choice language, the frightful prevalence, even among the highest aristocracy, of opium-eating and kindred indulgences, it went on to particularise the sad case of an esteemed lady, of great wealth and high connexions, widow of a scion of one of our oldest families, who, having unwisely yielded

herself, during many years past, to an inordinate use of morphine, as an antidote to nervous disorder, had, on the previous evening, in a temporary paroxysm of madness, succeeded in taking her own life. 'No other cause can be assigned for the rash act,' pursued the paragraph, 'Mrs. V. being in all other respects than as regarded this unfortunate weakness, blessed beyond the average. She was at the moment, it is understood, contemplating immediate departure or a lengthened sojourn in Europe, taking with her an only son, a young man of fine attainments, and a recent graduate of one of our first Theological Seminaries, who desired to seek, among the European capitals, at once for the recreation and culture, which the arduous preparation for, and the enlightened prosecution of, his exalted calling, rendered respectively necessary and desirable. It is not known whether this sad casualty will cause him to relinquish his design.'

After finishing this paragraph, which discreetly suppressed any further personality than to remark that the deceased bore one of those quaint old Knickerbocker surnames which are in New York synonymous with *haut ton* and gentility, Bressant folded up the paper, and resting

his arms upon the back of the seat in front of him, made them a pillow for his forehead. This position he maintained so long, that his neighbour with the wig came to the conclusion that he must be either asleep or drunk ; and by way of arriving at some solution of the question, abstracted from his hand the rolled up newspaper which protruded out of it. At this the young man roused himself, and presently turned to him of the wig, and thanked him for his loan with an earnestness which appeared to him, under the circumstances, rather uncalled for. He began to doubt the prudence of sitting next to so large a man, of so singular a behaviour, and took advantage of the next vacancy that occurred to shift his quarters, carrying the newspaper with him.

Darkness had fallen, and the lighted interior of the crowded car had duplicated itself, through the medium of the glass window-pane, upon the black vacancy without, long before the train halted at the station which marked the boundary of Bressant's riding privilege. He got out, and was immediately smitten in the face by the cold, impalpable fingers of a thick falling snow-storm.

A bobbing lantern, carried by an invisible man, was all that came to welcome him. He walked into the waiting-room, which was lighted by a lamp with a dirty tin reflector behind it, and was furnished with a few well-worn chairs, painted grey, and polished by use; a couple of spittoons, and a pyramidal stove containing the ashes of the day's fire. The plaster walls were ornamented by many-coloured railway cards, and by a fly-spotted and dusty map. A clock was fastened over the door.

He turned to the man with the lantern (who was standing in the doorway, looking as if he rather suspected Bressant contemplated stealing some of the valuables of the place), and asked him whether he could tell him the nearest road to his destination? After considerable questioning and delay, the man finally announced his entire ignorance in the matter; and Bressant was just about to make him a sharp rejoinder, when his eyes happened to fall upon the map. He stepped up to it, and found it to be of the State in which they were.

By the aid of the lantern, and a good deal of dusting, he finally discovered the spot in which he then stood, and managed to trace out a doubt-

ful line of road, between that and the place whither he was bound. There seemed to be few cross roads, however, and such as there were he rapidly noted in his memory. In one place the road ran off in a kind of loop, to pass through an out-lying village, and by making a cross-cut at that point, he might save himself five or six miles. But since, on calculation, he found it would be at least six o'clock in the morning before he got to the loop in question, he decided not to risk abandoning, in the state he would then be in, the beaten track for any such problematical advantage.

As he left the dirty waiting-room, and the invisible man with the lantern, the clock over the door marked five minutes past eight. Although it was more than twelve hours since he had eaten food, he was not (owing to having passed so much of the day in sleep) so hungry as he might have been. Nevertheless, appreciating what a task was before him, he would have given anything that he could call his own for a good meal before starting. But he had handed over his last cent to the conductor, and now, time pressed him.

He was young and strong, and no one was

more tireless in walking than he ; his joints were firm as iron, yet supple and springy ; his muscles tough and lean, of immense enduring power ; his lungs were deep, and he breathed easily through his nostrils ; his gait was long and elastic ; but, had he been twice the man he was, the journey upon which he was now started would have been no child's play ; being what he was, it was nothing less than a hazard of life and death. But Bressant seemed to think the peril quite worth encountering, in consideration of the chance of arriving by noon next day at the Parsonage door ; and, for the first time in his life, he felt grateful to God for the mighty bones and sinews he had given him. This was the time to use them, if they were paralysed for ever after !

Having gained the road, he set off with a long swinging stride, such as the Indians use, half-way between a walk and a run. As long as he could keep that up he would be making six miles an hour—a mile and a half over the necessary rate ; but he well knew he would need all his surplus before morning broke, and was determined to make it as large as possible before want of food weakened him. The road, except

for the snow, was favourable for speed, being nearly level and tolerably straight; but the flakes flying into his eyes made it impossible to be sure of his footing; and the various ruts and inequalities, common to all American turnpikes, and aggravated by the half-frozen snow covering, caused him several slips and stumbles; trifling matters enough at other times, but now, when every unnecessary breath and false step would count up terribly in the end, quite sufficiently serious.

The vigorous motion, however, sent the blood singing through his body from head to foot. He felt exhilarated and braced. The driving snow melted pleasantly on his warm face, and ran down into his thickly-curling beard, crusted over with frozen breath and sleet. The cold air came long and refreshingly into his wide-open nostrils. He took off his fur cap and threw open the breast of his pea jacket. His exuberant physical sensations wrought a corresponding effect upon his previous mental gloom: he found himself looking to the future with dawns of a new hope and cheerfulness. At no time in his life had he felt himself existing through so wide and full a range. He was a

man now in full breadth and height, and, as he looked back upon his previous life, he could trace, as from a lofty vantage ground, the plan and bearing of his former thoughts and deeds.

He remarked, the wide discrepancies between what he had proposed and what he had accomplished. How insignificant circumstances had effected momentous results ! He saw how, whenever failure and dishonour had filtered in, it was where weakness, self-indulgence, or untruthfulness had left an opening. He saw how one wrong had been a sure and easy path to another, until in the end he had grovelled face downwards in the mire.

His mind turned on the two women between whom his path had lain : how highly he had aimed, and how low he had fallen ! How enviable would have been his fate had he consistently kept to either ! for each had been peerless in her way. How despicable was his position, having greedily grasped at both ! And now the one was dying and the other degraded like himself. A worthy record that !

One was dying : yes, that he knew, and felt that upon his speed and resolution did it depend whether in this world he might hope for the

blessing of forgiveness from her lips. The thought urged him on, like an ever-fretting spur. He butted yet more swiftly into the darkness and against the reeling snow-flakes, and the road lay in steadily lengthening stretches behind him. She was waiting for him—that he felt—and was striving, with all her kind and loving might, to hold herself in life until he came. God help him, then, to be there at the appointed hour !

And Cornelia? Of her he ventured not much to think. She was, perchance, the key whereby, for her and for himself, this dark riddle should hereafter be resolved. As Adam might labour for redemption only with his sin about his neck, so they, out of the fabric woven of their disgrace, must seek to fashion garments in which worthily to appear at heaven's gates.

As his mind rambled thus, he came to the outskirts of a long, wooded tract, which—for the map, as he had seen it at the railway station, was clearly marked out in his memory, from the beginning to the end of his route—he knew was upwards of ten miles from his starting point ; and, as near as he could judge (his watch, lying at the bottom of the fountain basin in the Par-

sonage garden, had never been replaced), it must be rather more than half-past nine o'clock. He maintained the same long, swinging trot, as unfalteringly as ever, though, perhaps, a trifle less springily than at first. The footing was deep and heavy, the thick fir trees having kept the snow from being blown off the road, as in more exposed situations. Bressant was wet to his skin, for the temperature had risen, and the flakes melted as fast as they fell. Most of his glow and vigour remained, however, and he was no whit disheartened or doubtful. But the sky bent darkly over him, and the tall trees shut out all but a strip even of the scanty light that came thence. The moon would not rise for hours yet.

Another hour passed on over the toiling man. He had now begun to get among hills, and his course was always either up or down. This was in some degree a relief, affording change of movement to his muscles; but it probably lost him some little time, and certainly gave plenty of exercise to his lungs. Something of the superabundant warmth was leaving his body. He replaced his cap and buttoned up his jacket. What would not half a dozen biscuits have been worth to him now!

On and on. The hills opened, and in the enclosure they made lay a small village, with its white meeting-house and clustering dwellings. The windows were many of them alight : the people were sitting up for the new year. Bressant wondered whether it would dawn for any of them so strangely as for him ! As he hurried along the empty street, a sign over one of the doors, barely discernible in the darkness, attracted his attention. He paused close to it, and made out the words, ' West India goods and groceries ; ' and at once his fancy revelled in the savoury eatables stored beyond his reach. What cheese and butter, what hams, biscuits, and apples ; what salted cod-fish and strings of sausages, were there ! Had the store been open, he would have been tempted to rush in, knock the salesman senseless, and make off with whatever he could carry. Strange thoughts these for a man bound on an errand of life and death ! But hunger is no respecter of occasions, however inopportune, or of emotions, however incongruous. Bressant passed on. He was now twenty-five miles on his way, and as he came beneath the meeting-house clock, it struck twelve : the new year had come ! To Bressant

it brought only the knowledge that he was seven miles ahead of his time ; and this served in some measure to counteract the depression caused by his hunger. But on—on ! There were still fifty miles to go !

The village vanished, like the old year, behind him. He was now crossing a lofty plateau, over which swept the wind, strong and chilly. He began to feel the cold now, and his wet clothes, once in a while, made him shiver. His physical exhilaration had left him, and his long trot, save where a downward slope favoured him, had gradually sobered into a quick walk. His shoes, soaked with snow water, began to chafe his feet. But he knew better than to stop for rest : the only safety lay in keeping steadily on ; and on he kept, his mouth set grimly, and his head a little bent forwards.

From the top of the plateau was a gradual descent of some five miles ; and here Bressant again fell into a run, reaching the bottom, without extraordinary exertion, in a trifle less than three quarters of an hour. He felt the need of his watch very keenly now : it would have been a great assistance and encouragement to know just how much he was doing. He could no

longer afford to waste any strength, even in making calculations : he was fully occupied in putting one foot before another.

How dark, and cold, and blankly disheartening it was ! He had now completed fifty miles, though he knew it not ; but it seemed to him as if he had been full a hundred. His feet, rubbed raw, and stiffened by the cold, were beginning to retard his pace alarmingly. His face and lips were pale ; a sensation of emptiness and chilled vitality pervaded his body. It had come down to grim hard work : every step was a conscious effort ; and yet he had no time to spare.

The storm had lightened considerably, but the young man's eyes were dull and heavy : it was a constant struggle to keep awake. He scarcely attended to the road, but plunged along, careless of where he trod. Suddenly, however, and for the first time since starting, he came to a dead halt, and, after gazing about him a moment, cried out in dismay. And well he might, for he stood in a field, with no sign anywhere of road or path ! In his sleepy inattention, he had lost his way and wandered he knew not whither.

At first he was too much paralysed by this discovery to think or act. He threw himself face downwards on the snow, and lay like a log. God was against him! How could he go on? Ah, how sweet felt that cold bed! Let him lie there in peace, to move no more! Surely he had done his best: who could blame him for a failure beyond his power to avert? The darkness would pass over him, and leave him stretched there motionless: the first light of morning would mark the dark outlines of his prostrate figure, and he would not turn to greet it. Daylight would succeed, the sun would climb the sky and shine down upon him warmly; but he would be insensible as to the darkness or the cold. Twilight would settle over the field again, and night, following, would find him as she had left him, prone upon his face, with outstretched arms. For he would be dead—dead—dead—and at rest!

But the end had not yet come. Ere he had quite sunk into insensibility, he was conscious of a feeling within him, as if some one were pulling—pulling at his heart, with a force benign and loving, yet strong as death itself. He staggered to his feet, and, stumbling as he

walked, set his face against the cold and cheerless sky once more. The pulling at his heart-strings seemed to draw him steadily in one certain direction: he traversed acres of field and pasture land blind and insensible to everything save this mysterious guide. In his weak and exhausted state his spiritual perceptions were doubtless less encumbered than when he was in full possession of his strength. So he was drawn undeviatingly on and on, until, unexpectedly, he found himself in a road again. Then he recognised that it was Sophie's spirit which had rescued him from death and failure. He had unconsciously made the short cut across the fields, which he had noticed and decided not to attempt when examining the map. He had saved five miles in distance, equal to fully an hour in time. The thought inspired him anew, and gave him further strength. With such divine encouragement, he could falter and hesitate no more.

Morning began to break dully over the sullen clouds as he resumed in earnest his weary journey. Each yard of ground passed was now a battle gained—every breath drawn a sobbing groan. Hills and dales rose successively before

him, clothed in the dead-white snow that had become a nightmare to his darkening sight. He reeled sometimes as he walked, dizzy from lack of sleep : a thousand fantastic fancies flitted through his hot brain : a deadly lethargy began once more to creep over his senses, but he gnawed the flesh of his lips to keep back consciousness. And still, when will grew powerless, he felt the mysterious strain upon his heart.

Only ten miles more ! But they seemed by far the longer part of the whole way. He was now within the range of his walks while living at the boarding-house, and could see in his mind every slope and ascent, every curve and angle, that lay between him and the Parsonage door ; and he felt the weight of every hill upon his shoulders. At the risk of falling, he stooped, snatched a handful of snow, and put it inside his cap, so that it lay, cold and refreshing, upon his brain. Then he took a handful in either hand, and so kept on.

The minutes grew into hours ; the hours seemed to become days ; but there, at last, the well-known village lay ! How reposeful and unconcerned the houses looked, as if there were no such thing in the world as effort, despair,

or victory! As he came near, Bressant tried to nerve himself, to walk erect and steady, to clear and concentrate his swimming sight and confused head. He dreaded to meet the village people, to have them come staring and questioning about him, whispering and laughing among themselves, and asking one another what was the matter with the man who was engaged to the minister's daughter on this his wedding morning. Just then he felt a gentle pulling at his heart!

Presently he was in the village. There was a disjointed vision of faces, some of which he knew, floating around him. Once in a while he caught the sound of a voice through the humming in his ears. Were they offering him assistance? warning him? calling to him? He knew not, nor cared. He passed on, feebly, but desperately. He saw the clock on the church-steeple mark half-past eleven: still in time, thank God! but no time to lose.

How well he knew the road, over which he was now groping his staggering and uncertain way! In how many moods he had walked it, actuated by how many different passions and impulses! And now he was as one dead, whose

body is dragged strangely onward by some invincibly determined will. A great fear suddenly seized upon him that here, upon this very last mile of all the weary ones he had trod since the previous nightfall, he was going to sink down and give up his life and his attempt at the same moment. Oh! Heaven help him to the end! Oh, Sophie, let not the tender strain upon his heart relax!

For nothing less than that can save him now! His eyes see no longer; his feet stumble in ignorance: he sleeps, and dreams of events which happened—was it long ago?—upon this road. Here he met and talked with Cornelia, that autumn day. Back there, they paused on the brow of the hill, one moonlight night, was that so long ago, too? Here, some time in the past, he had found a lifeless body in the snow, clad in a bridal dress; here he had caught a runaway horse by the head and—

He fell headlong to the ground. The shock partly awoke him. He struggled up to his knees—was there any one assisting him?—another struggle—he was on his feet. Right before him lay the house—the old Parsonage:

there were the gate, the path, the porch. He made a final effort—it forced a deadly sweat from his forehead—and still there was a vague sense of being supported and directed by some one—he could not stop to see or question who; but had it not been for that support, he must have failed. The gate opened, with its old creak and rattle, before him: a hand he saw not held it till he passed through.

Now, at the moment when he had fallen in the road, of the three who had all along been awaiting him within—of those three, two only were left. But so quietly had the third departed, the others perceived not that she was gone. The features, which remained, wore an expression of angelic happiness. It was as she had wished.

At the same moment, too, through a rift in the dull sky, a little gleam of sunshine—the first of that grey day—descended, and rested upon Bressant. It accompanied him to the gate and still keeping close to him, slipped up the path between the trees, and even followed him on to the porch, where it brightened about him, as he put his hand to the latch. Was it a symbol of some loving spirit, newly set free from its

mortal body, come to watch over him for ever more?

An old woman, who stood without clutching the palings of the gate, saw Bressant open the door and pass inward, and the sunshine entered with him. The door was left ajar :—might not she enter too? Just then, a little ormolu clock, on the mantel-piece inside, gave a preliminary whirr, and hastily struck the hour of noon. As if in answer to a signal, the sun smiled broadly forth, and quite transfigured the weather-beaten old Parsonage.

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